ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Autobiography of a Geisha
Sayo Masuda
G. Rowley, translator
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Americans are familiar with a romanticized view of geisha life in Japan, one that includes art and music, poetry and social status. Not all geisha, however, live such a life, as this poignant, compelling tale relates.

Beginning with her sale to a wealthy landowner as a nursemaid at age five, the author's story shows the desperation of poverty as it drives a parent to sell a child into servitude. Masuda relates how she received the nickname "Little Crane": "In winter, no matter how cold it was, I was never allowed to wear socks; and so I would lift one leg up and warm my foot on the thigh of the other leg, doing this over and over again so that I was always standing on one leg." Mealtimes were chancy at best: "There was a chipped bowl that they left under the sink in the kitchen into which they put their leftover rice and soup. If there were lots of leftovers, then even with just that one bowl I'd be full; but if nothing had been left, then that was that."

Although told in a matter-of-fact manner, Masuda's story is nonetheless engaging. Her voice has been preserved through the skill of translator Rowley, a teacher at Waseda University in Tokyo, who is the first to translate this book into English. Masuda originally entered her short story in a national magazine contest, in order to raise money. This publication, Rowley explains, led to a book, solicited by the Heibonsha publishing house, which was first printed in Japanese in 1957 and is still in print today.

Masuda's early years as a nursemaid, and her resale, at age twelve, to a hot-springs-resort geisha house, reveal conditions of life for women and children in pre-World War II Japan that are both disturbing and enlightening. Further, her training as a geisha and her career offering "sex for money," says Rowley, reveal a more accurate portrait of the geisha life than that presented in other books that focus only on the influential Tokyo geisha society.

There is far more to Masuda's story, however, than this. Masuda herself was, and is (still living, at age seventy-five), a courageous survivor despite the catastrophes that life brought her. She survived a horrific childhood, the losses of a love and a brother—the only family member

ever to show her real love—and near—starvation in the wake of World War II. She persevered, coming to terms with life. Her endurance of adversity is admirable, as is the down-to-earth way in which she relates her story. She is witty, realistic, and forthright about her life, and readers will admire her courage and determination.

Marlene Satter