

Edokko: Growing Up a Foreigner in Wartime Japan

Isaac Shapiro

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Expatriates living in a foreign country in wartime encounter fearful uncertainties. If fortunate enough to escape deportation or incarceration, they still must endure food rationing and shortages that can affect their health and well-being. Continuing air raids disturb sleep, and the bombs that follow destroy homes and lives indiscriminately. For children of these expat families, life in a strange land becomes even stranger.

Born in Tokyo to Russian-Jewish parents, Isaac Shapiro was eleven years old when World War II broke out. Professional musicians, his parents had settled in Japan in the late 1920s, when the rising popularity of Western classical music in that country offered employment to performers and teachers. “Edokko” means “Child of Edo,” Edo being Tokyo’s name before it became the country’s capital in 1868. The author chronicles his maternal and paternal family background in Russia and their efforts to find safe havens in post-World War I Europe. The story continues by describing the significant personal, family, and national events that occurred during the family’s time in Japan.

When the Japanese international school he’d been attending shut down, Isaac briefly enrolled in the American School before transferring to a Catholic school. Students attending foreign schools in Japan were required to study Japanese history, using an English textbook approved by the government. The author writes, “Japanese history became one of my favorite subjects and helped me to understand the mores and structure of Japanese society.”

Isaac’s father caused tensions within the family. Harshly demanding of his five sons and jealous of his wife’s musical expertise, Constantine Shapiro refused to attend her piano concerts. “Papa was not as professionally successful as Mama,” Shapiro writes. “Part of the reason was his personality. He was tactless. He was also easily intimidated...not a good earner.”

The family waited hopefully by the radio the morning Japanese surrender was expected. Then they heard the emperor’s almost inaudible voice announcing that Japan had decided to end the war. Shapiro says he couldn’t know “that thirty years later, as President of the Japan Society in New York, I would be greeting the emperor and chatting with him.”

At the age of fourteen, following Japan’s surrender, an unexpected offer paved Isaac’s way to the United States. Isaac completed his high school education in Hawaii, received bachelor and law degrees from Columbia University, and became a US citizen. After fifty years of law practice and urging from family and friends, he wrote this informative memoir.

The author writes fondly of his birth country. The affinity for Japan that Shapiro developed during childhood continued throughout his adult life. He assimilated successfully into both Japanese and American cultures with considerable initiative and fortitude. His straightforward writing style lacks literary tone, but the authentic voice satisfactorily compensates. Shapiro’s lawyerly emphasis on detail and clarity results in repetition of information that may annoy some alert readers.

Overall, this memoir is valuable for its story of one family's extraordinary efforts to adapt and survive in foreign countries during times of great international conflict.

MARGARET CULLISON (August 16, 2010)

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