

Yanaka Melody

THE delightfully cluttered and funky coffee house was called “Rampo,” named after a prolific 20th century Japanese mystery writer, Edogawa Rampo. Say his pseudonym out loud and you’ll hear an approximation of “Edgar Allan Poe.” Yoshi, as a teenager, read many Edogawa Rampo books, most of them written before she was born. A Rampo bestseller, *The Man With 20 Faces*, sticks in her memory to this very day. We stumbled on the place in Tokyo’s Yanaka village, not realizing that the jazz coffee house was somewhat famous, a destination of sorts. A few feet from where I sipped my coffee was a snoozing cat. It wasn’t until I got on the Internet that I learned the cat was



Jackson Sellers
December 2007



named Ryosuke and had lots of fans. The shop's cat-related knickknacks and posters were no surprise. The *Asahi Shimbun*, just the day before, had called Yanaka a "purr-fect" place. You see, stray cats are welcome there and they are everywhere. I had never before visited Yanaka but I found it nostalgic. *Déjà vu*, you know? The pretentiously named Yanaka Ginza at right reminded me of the alleyways of my 1950s-60s youth – in Yokosuka as a Navy officer and in Tokyo as a student and newspaperman. Yanaka's charm survives today because it was not destroyed by American bombs in the 1940s. And, too, because it lies within *Shitamachi*, Tokyo's earthy "downtown," as opposed to *Yamanote*, the city's snooty "uptown." Such social distinctions have blurred over the decades, but they have not completely faded away. Regardless, *Shitamachi* towns are more fun for a Tokyo-visiting Kentuckian like me. Leaving the Rampo coffee house, Yoshi and I trudged up a street lined on both sides with old houses that fronted an amazing number of Buddhist temples, one after the other. The photo below is typical. We were on our way to the huge Yanaka



cemetery where lay the tomb of Tokugawa Yoshinobu, Japan's last *shogun* if you don't count General Douglas MacArthur. That's Yoshinobu at right, in military uniform, circa 1867. At bottom right is his tomb. The 15th Tokugawa generalissimo, whose family had ruled Japan for 260 years, was defeated in battle and allowed to resign with honor. Bye-bye, *Shogun*. Hello, Emperor Meiji, now the big boss, who left ancient Kyoto and moved to upstart Edo, renaming it Tokyo.

