

In 1966, while living in Louisville, Kentucky, Yoshi described her World War II childhood in an article in *The Courier-Journal Magazine*. The article was published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Japan's Pearl Harbor attack. Yoshiko Iizuka Sellers got the by-line, but it was Jack, now Jackson, who interviewed her to the point of irritability, then ghost-wrote the piece in the first person, always careful to keep the English prose casual and simple enough to convey the impression that an intelligent Japanese girl might actually have written it.

This woman-child of a well-to-do Japanese family had found herself, oh so suddenly, in a foreign country, in Kentucky of all places, where nobody spoke Japanese and many spoke English with a Southern twang that wasn't fully understandable. She had to order Japanese food by mail from Chicago! No Japanese newspapers or radio! *Pregnant!* Completely dependent on this hopelessly American man, this hairy barbarian who, for reasons she only vaguely understood, could not make a home for her in the civilized world of Tokyo. And she, for reasons beyond understanding, had felt compelled to come with him to Kentucky's Louisville.



Yoshi on her 1965 honeymoon in Kyoto, a train ride from cosmopolitan Tokyo. A year later she would be pregnant in Kentucky, dragged there by her husband.

## **“I Was Nearly 6 Years Old When the War Started . . .”**

by Yoshiko Iizuka Sellers, *The Courier-Journal Magazine*, December 5, 1966

*For me, a Japanese, it was Dec. 8, not Dec. 7, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor 25 years ago. The day that Americans remember as the start of World War II had already slipped across the international dateline when word came in the midst of our war with China that we Japanese had another enemy. It came and it went, and since it started what was to lead to our defeat, it means nothing to us now. Almost all Japanese will stare at you blankly if you ask, “What happened on Dec. 8, 1941?” Even for me, the Japanese wife of an American, it's hard to remember.*

*I was nearly 6 years old when the war with America started, and I lived*

*with my grandparents, parents and five older brothers and sisters in Gunma Prefecture, about three hours by train from Tokyo. When Japan surrendered four years later, I was halfway through the fourth grade of school. It would have shocked me during the war to learn that I would someday marry an American and live in Louisville, Kentucky, a place I had never heard of. Sometimes at school, after bowing toward Emperor Hirohito's shrine in the schoolyard, we would march away to work on the farms, singing a little patriotic song — "Nimitz, MacArthur! Come on! We'll kill you!" My husband tells me that, at the same time, he was writing verse entitled "Wipe the Japs Off the Map."*

*The prefecture in which we lived was about the size of a Kentucky county, but in tiny Japan it was considered a state. Then as now it had large cities and industries sprinkled through its mountains and agricultural areas. My family lived in several houses inside a compound owned by my grandfather. We were quite comfortable. It wasn't until near the end of the war that there was less and less of everything, including the sweet cakes that I liked so much.*

*Late in the war, American bombers would come and go in Gunma Prefecture, and I would hear the bomb explosions. The sound of the warning sirens terrified me. Even today I'm startled when the noon sirens start wailing in Louisville. But I can't say that the war touched me as it did thousands and thousands of people in Tokyo, Osaka, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For me there was always enough to eat, if not enough sweet cakes. But it was considered frivolous and unpatriotic to wear colorful clothes. Once my mother made some pretty clothes for me with material from an old kimono, and I wore them proudly to school. I was called to the principal's office and chastised for wearing such clothes at a time when brave people were dying for our country.*

*War is a stupid business. Baseball — adopted from America — had long been a favorite sport in Japan, with the Japanese players and fans using such American terms as "ball," "strike," etc. During the war, all American expressions were forbidden, and "strike," for example, became "chyokkyu," a ridiculous Japanese combination meaning "straight ball." Now we are using the American baseball expressions again. But this sort of thing wasn't limited to Japan. I hear that in America some people wanted to cut down the beautiful Japanese cherry blossom trees in Washington. A stupid business, war.*

*In the end, of course, Japan was defeated. I heard the Emperor's radio broadcast announcing the surrender, telling us that we must pave the way to peace "by enduring the unendurable and suffering the insufferable." It was the first time we had heard the Emperor's voice. I didn't know what it all meant, but when the adults cried, I cried too.*

*My grandfather, descended from the samurai warriors who once ranked at the top of the Japanese social scale, was a lucky man. He lived during a time when his heritage protected him and died during the war when nearly everything was about to be lost. [This is a mistake. Yoshi's grandfather, Ginai Iizuka, died in 1949, several years after the war ended.] He was a dignified man with huge handlebar mustaches, always dressed in Japanese-style clothing, and he was a recognized expert at kendo, a Japanese martial sport to which he devoted almost all his time. When he came home from the kendo school that he operated, where kimonod men in face masks learned the art of swordfighting by using long wooden sticks, he would clear his throat loudly in the garden. It was a signal for my parents and brothers and sisters to assemble at the doorway to greet him, with my father bowing him in and the rest of the family lined up on their knees, heads nearly touching the floor mats. But the rule didn't apply to me. I was too young. "Hi, Grandfather," I would yell, running to him. He didn't smile much but he was pleased with me, I think.*

*My grandfather was not a samurai because such titles were eliminated by Emperor Meiji's restoration nearly 100 years ago. But being a member of an old samurai family was still a pretty big thing before and during the war, and my grandfather and father, like most other Japanese, were influenced somewhat by the old samurai code with its emphasis on bravery, loyalty and racial superiority. Until the restoration, when Emperor Hirohito's grandfather took firm control of the country, Japan had been ruled for hundreds of years by a succession of "seitaishogun," or "barbarian-conquering generals," and the resulting bias against foreigners, or "barbarians," exists to a degree even today. My husband, with good reason not to be completely pleased with my father's side of the family, tends to overemphasize the role the samurai code has played in shaping any anti-foreign feelings that remain in modern Japan. I say it would be just as reasonable to attribute American actions today to the prejudices of King George III.*

*As a landowner, my grandfather never had to worry about making a living. Each year the tenant farmers would bring money and rice to the compound. But my poor father, who took the family reins after my grandfather's death, was not equipped to deal with the upside-down situation evolving from Japan's defeat. Some of his properties were burned in the Tokyo air raids, but the real beginning of his downfall came with Gen. MacArthur's land-reform policies. He had to sell most of his land at ridiculously low prices. Modern times did the rest. He started many businesses, including silk and ham factories, but he failed at all of them because he couldn't compete in a world that wasn't his own. For years he has been selling off one piece of property after another. He has held onto many of the*

*old ways, however, and once, just a few years ago, he gave me a sword that had been in the family for 250 years — one of the few that he hadn't donated to Japan's war effort. Later, when he discovered that I had ignored a speck of rust, he took it back.*

*Today my father, much mellowed, likes my husband very much, but the rest of his side of the family, for one reason or another, was scandalized when I married a "hairy barbarian," and we didn't dare invite them to our wedding party in Tokyo last year. Happily, our party was crowded with people from my mother's side of the family, who are more liberal and intelligent about such things.*

*When the war was over, most Japanese discovered that Americans were not as barbaric as they had thought, and the Occupation went smoothly under Gen. MacArthur, who reminded us of the old barbarian-conquering generals, with us, strangely, as the barbarians. But there were many other changes in our lives. At the beginning, when everything was scarce, my textbooks were the same, but many pages and paragraphs dealing with a glorious and victorious Japan were blacked out. My older brothers and sisters, members of the war generation, today know relatively little about America and the Western world, while I, a member of the postwar generation, know relatively little about Japan's heroes of the past. My husband, a former naval officer, was surprised when I displayed ignorance about Admiral Togo, Japan's greatest naval hero, whose ships virtually destroyed the entire Russian Baltic fleet in the Battle of the Japan Sea in 1905. It's like Americans not knowing who John Paul Jones was, my husband says.*

*But it's really not so surprising. We of the postwar generation were busy with other things. Everyone was talking about something called "demokurashi," or democracy, and young people began pulling away from family ties, seeking their own way in the world and choosing their own husbands and wives. I don't re-*

Kei, you will smile when you see the abrupt ending here. Your mother's article, mounted in an old album, was long stored in a crowded library chest of drawers through which you pawed on the occasions when you wished to look back into your own past and even further into your family's. For most of your conscious life, the article was available to you, but always in its truncated form. The so-called "jump" — the magazine's concluding portion — was lost before you were old enough to read it. For you, the article had always ended in the middle of a word. "*I don't re- ....*" Re-what? Finally, in 1991, five years before you died, you asked that very question. "Re-what, daddy?" So I asked George Gill to send a copy from the *Louisville Courier-Journal* archives. George and I were

journalism students at Indiana University in the early Fifties. When I was sports editor of the *Indiana Daily Student*, he worked for me. Years later, when I was a writer for the *Courier-Journal* at the time Yoshi's article was published, I worked for him. Now he was president and publisher of the *C-J*, victorious in the bitter political battles that saw the downfall of Barry Bingham's Louisville dynasty. He was no longer a fair-haired boy, but he was definitely the journalistic kingpin of Kentucky. George mailed a copy of Yoshi's 25-year-old article, along with a note:

*Nice to hear from you. Was thinking last Sunday  
while at the Indy 500 that you and I went to the race  
in 1953, which is 38 years ago. God!*

So here, at long last, were your mother's final paragraphs, published less than two months before you were born. I am glad you got to read them while you were alive.

*I don't remember the first time I saw Americans. Suddenly they were there, in Gunma Prefecture, and we who were now studying English in school would timidly say, "Herro," mispronouncing the word horribly. The tall Americans would grin and reply, "Hello."*

*For months after the end of the war, the trains between Tokyo and Gunma Prefecture were packed with Tokyoites searching for food to take back to their families. Men and women would roam the countryside, carrying family keepsakes that they were willing to trade for anything edible. But by the time I went to Tokyo to enter junior high school in 1948, conditions were much better, and by the time the peace treaty was signed in 1951, Japan was enjoying a business boom that would eventually make it the richest nation in Asia. Tokyo was looking more and more like Chicago and other large Western cities.*

*But the old ways died hard. During my college days and afterward, I was hounded by the ancient custom of "omiaiai," which literally means "meet and see." Many times my parents, relatives and friends tried to arrange a marriage for me, showing me photographs of boys whom I was supposed to "meet" and then "see" if I wanted to marry one of them. Under this custom, which is still practiced to a degree in Japan today, a girl might marry a man whom she had met only a few times. Always I refused, and my parents never forced me, as they might have done in the old days. Like most other Japanese girls of my age, I wanted to find my own husband.*

*I finally found him in a Russian restaurant operated in Tokyo by a Greek*

*American. By that time I was a tourist guide for the Japan Travel Bureau. My future husband, then as now, was a newspaperman.*

*To some people on both sides of the Pacific, our marriage was unwise, but we went ahead anyway — as have thousands of other American-Japanese couples since the end of the war. I would speak of love — but my husband tells me it's corny. Anyway, it's getting harder and harder to remember Pearl Harbor. If my paternal relatives were shocked by my marriage to a hairy barbarian, I wonder what they will say when I soon become the mother of one?*