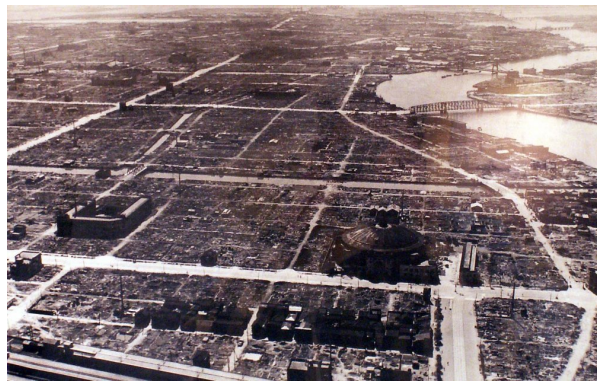


## The Showa Emperor's Tour of Tokyo, March 18, 1945

Hotta Yoshie

*On the morning of March 10, 1945, Hotta Yoshie could not believe his eyes when he saw the extent of the devastation caused by the massive firebombing raid on Tokyo's Shitamachi district that came to be known as the Great Tokyo Air Raid. On March 18, concerned about the fate of a close female friend, he again walked through the burned-out area, where he was astonished to witness the Emperor conducting an inspection of the damage at a shrine in Fukagawa. A quarter of a century later, in Hojoki shiki (Personal Reflections on the Hojiki; 1970), Hotta described these experiences in the context of the famous essay Hojiki by the poet Kamo no Chomei (1153-1216). The following extracts, translated by The Asia-Pacific Journal, are from Hotta's account of what he saw and his reflections on it in the context of Japanese politics and the Buddhist concept of impermanence.*



**Aerial photograph looking from Ryokoku towards Fukagawa, March 10, 1945**

### A Strange Ceremony

On the morning of March 10, 1945, K and I took a tram to Meguro Station. No trains or trams were running beyond Meguro, so we had to walk to the place where K's family's freight office was located, near Shiodome Freight Terminal in Shimbashi. K was worried about his father, who had stayed there overnight. We could already see a thick cloud of smoke and ashes in the sky over the entire Shitamachi district to the east. Every few minutes, columns of smoke suddenly rose up above the hovering cloud. In the vicinity of Shibazono Bridge, our pace quickened as we started to worry whether the freight office had escaped the inferno and whether K's father was safe. A steady stream of people were staggering along from the opposite direction. Some of them had obviously escaped within an inch of their lives; their tattered clothes were burned away in places, exposing their flesh. Others carried the few precious belongings they had managed to salvage. Nearly all of them had black soot around their noses and bluish-black rings of dust around their mouths and eyes. The soot accentuated the lines on their foreheads and other facial features. They all seemed to be in tears, but they were not crying; their eyes had been damaged by the heat and smoke. The injuries were not just on their faces. Many of them had applied greasy white burn ointment to their arms and legs. At certain places beside the road, people were queuing to have their eyes washed by doctors in civilian uniform or policemen. When we reached Shimbashi, we started seeing charred corpses and the burned-out skeletons of fire trucks and trams on the road. As we walked, we had to kick aside the tube-shaped metal incendiary cases that were scattered all over the place.

As it happened, the freight office miraculously escaped the fires, while all the buildings around it had burned to the ground. Amid those piles of scorched sheet metal and plaster, the building stood alone in three dimensions. As I gazed at it, I had a feeling akin to seasickness. Even the memory of it makes me queasy. The words “in three dimensions” may seem strange, but in that wasteland where everything had been burned flat, the metal safes, stone storehouses, and the few structures whose outer walls remained had somehow become quite independent from their surroundings. In that setting, a whole building that had miraculously escaped the inferno left a strong impression of solidity.

While feeling relieved that K’s family business had survived the fires, I couldn’t help thinking how absurd it looked, standing there on its own in the burned-out wasteland. Looking back on it, it is hard to separate those feelings, but that might be due to my own philosophical development over the past twenty-five years. Nevertheless, that feeling of absurdity was a sort of epiphany for me. At that moment it occurred to me that if everything – all the houses, offices and institutions– burned to the ground and everyone, beginning with the Emperor who had been commander-in-chief since the Manchurian Incident, were made homeless, it would not only be the end of everything but also a new beginning. This absurd thought struck me with the force of a revelation: What if everyone were turned into refugees from top to bottom, from the army general down to the forced laborer, from the Emperor down to the common soldier?

Early on the morning of March 18, 1945, while it was still dark, I left K’s house and made my way to Fukagawa, taking trams where they were running and walking the distances in between. That year, March 18 was the first day of the Equinox. I was not a Buddhist, but my thoughts were particularly dark that morning. A close female friend of mine lived in

Fukagawa, but it seemed impossible that she had survived that relentless firebombing raid. By then everyone knew that the entire Honjo and Fukagawa districts had been reduced to ashes. Her home was near the network of canals around the Sumida River and Kiba, and I had already heard the rumors that nearly everyone who sought refuge in the water had perished. In truth, there wasn’t much point in going to Fukagawa. The authorities had placed the highest priority on disposing of the bodies quickly, and many of the dead had been impossible to identify. I knew it was pointless, but I still wanted to see the ruins for myself and tell others what it was like.

When I got halfway across Eitai Bridge, I was astonished at what I saw. The word “astonished” hardly seems adequate. Even astonishment lies within the range of familiar sensations, but I have never experienced the shock I felt at that moment before or since. It stopped me in my tracks in the middle of the bridge. The sun had only half risen, but even in that dim light I could see that, in the direction of Monzen-nakacho and the timber yards of Kiba to the east, there was absolutely nothing left at all. I even had the impression I could see the Arakawa River in the distance. It was all flat; everything had burned to the ground. When I heard that the raging fires had leapt across the wide Sumida River from both the left and right banks, I could understand how fierce that inferno must have been, but the reality of it was far beyond my imagination. Once I had crossed Eitai Bridge and entered the district from Suga to Monzen-nakacho, I noticed one important difference between it and the area I had just passed through on the other side of the Sumida River. Amid the ruins on that side, there were many wooden boards with handwritten messages indicating where people had moved or evacuated to. On this side, however, there were hardly any at all. That could only mean that nearly everyone living here had perished in the inferno. They had all been burned alive.

My friend had lived in Tomioka, between Fudoson Temple and Hachiman Shrine. There was nothing left of that district except for the metal safes and stone storehouses. Even the sheet metal had melted into weirdly shaped lumps. The heat must have been ferocious. As far as the eye could see, everything was burned flat apart from the iron skeleton of the Ishikawajima shipyard.

It was about seven thirty in the morning. I noticed that there were a lot of policemen and military police around Eitai Bridge, but I thought nothing of it at the time. I assumed they were there to clear the roads and watch out for looters. Here and there I saw men and women, who had either miraculously survived the inferno or returned from evacuation, standing in the ruins of their homes, offices or factories. Some of them were digging with shovels, while others searched the debris with their bare hands. If they could find just one usable cooking pot, it would be a precious possession. Needless to say I just stood and watched; I had not come here to do anything.

Gazing blankly at the ruins of Tomioka Hachiman Shrine, I couldn't even make out where the inner shrine and hall of worship had been. All that was left were the stone gateway, pavement and steps. The stone was covered with a reddish-brown powder that came off in flakes when I touched it. Only the blackened trunks of the camphor and birdlime trees remained. It was hard to believe that this had once been Hachiman Shrine, but the charred tree trunks and gateway, pavement and steps all testified to that fact. Strewn about on the ground were the burned belongings of people who must have fled to the shrine when the conflagration began. Perhaps they had thrown them away as they ran and burned to death somewhere nearby. The policemen and military police, assembled in unusually large numbers here too, were kicking the cooking pots and other abandoned items along the stone pavement. They were apparently clearing up

the place, so I decided to leave the shrine precincts.

I had no idea where to go next. I walked in a daze towards Kiba and from there to Suzaki. In Suzaki Benten-cho there was a baseball field where I had gone to watch a professional match several years before. That whole area was reclaimed land, and at high tide puddles would form here and there on the playing field. I remembered how I had enjoyed that rustic atmosphere. With no particular thoughts in my head, not even about the fate of my friend, I walked past what looked like the remains of the Fujikura Electric Cable factory. At about nine o'clock, I returned to the ruins of Hachiman Shrine.

Once again I was astonished by what I saw. In the short time I had been away from the shrine, the ruins had been made neat and tidy. Military policemen were standing at each corner and now there seemed to be more high-ranking officers among them. Together with them were civil servants dressed in suits and puttees and bureaucrats in civilian uniforms. The military police were not the sort of people you could approach. Keeping my distance, I watched to see what would happen next.

At just after nine, to my amazement a motorcade of mostly foreign-made vehicles appeared on the road from Eitai Bridge. Among them was one maroon car. This procession was so utterly out of keeping with the burned-out wasteland that I could hardly believe my eyes. Surely there could be no spectacle more incongruous than this. The only human beings who seemed to belong here were the survivors who glared at passers-by with wolf-like eyes. Raising clouds of dust in the wasteland, the procession of cars and motorcycles with sidecars drew to a halt.

From inside the maroon car, glittering in the morning sun, emerged the Emperor in military uniform and immaculately polished boots. Avoiding the sharp eyes of the military police, I



was standing less than two hundred meters away behind a concrete wall that seemed to be part of the ruins of a factory. I just stood there watching, frozen to the spot.

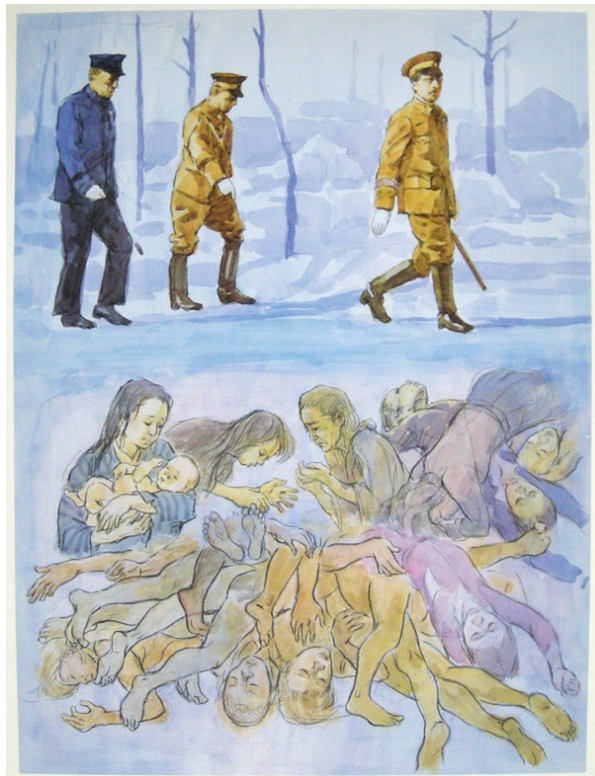


**The Emperor inspecting the bombed areas on March 18, 1945**

All the way back from Fukagawa, I was deep in thought. For the very first time I thought for myself about Japan's war, which had started with the Manchurian Incident when I was a junior high school student, and about the man who stood at the core of politics. Even when I was drafted into the army, I had not given these matters much thought. When I received my draft card, all I felt was anger at the insolence of not even attaching a signature to that order to offer my life for the nation.

As I walked along or rode on trams, I was not thinking about the Emperor himself, but about the behavior of the victims towards him. As soon as that strange ceremony in the ruins began, the people who had been digging here and there in the rubble gingerly approached until quite a few of them were gathered nearby. Putting down their fire hooks and spades on the ground in front of them, they knelt down in the

ashes and prostrated themselves before the Emperor. The cold spring wind carried the smell of iron and ashes, together with a strangely melancholy odor. It sent a cold chill through me, but that did not come from the wind alone. Squatting down and watching the proceedings through a hole in the concrete wall, I saw those people actually prostrating themselves on the ground. As they wept, I heard them muttering, "Your Majesty, due to our insufficient efforts this district has burned down. We are truly sorry and will sacrifice our lives for you."



**The victims are kept out of sight, Kanoh Teruo**

I could hardly believe my ears. Glancing occasionally at the Emperor's glittering red-brown car and shining boots, I thought to myself: How will they take responsibility for all this? Is there no way of throwing the whole lot

of them into the sea? But it seemed that the responsibility lay not with those who had created the cause of this catastrophe, but with the people who had lost their homes and relatives! Could there be anything more unreasonable than this? How could such an inversion of reality be possible?

These were my thoughts on my way back from Fukagawa. In just one night, more than 100,000 people had been killed or injured, but instead of thinking about how they were going to live, the survivors thought only of death. How had it come to this? Surely human beings should live for life, not for death. How had politics in Japan brought about a society that valued death above life? At the same time, I have to confess that I too had enjoyed that bracing feeling of devoting my whole being to the noble cause and being ready to sacrifice my life for the Emperor. Those two feelings battled within me. Back then, the judgments I made revolved around what was "decadent" and what was "healthy". The conclusion I reached was that, for human beings, it was healthier to be decadent.

In the ruins of the shrine, one by one, high officials and military men had approached a desk on which a map was spread out, made a deep bow to the Emperor, and gave their reports or explanations. To me it was a strange, incomprehensible ceremony, with absolutely no connection to the reality of the inferno a week earlier or the surrounding wasteland. Needless to say, the essence of this ceremony was not life but death. Moreover, that death was imposed on the people against their wishes. At that time, the kamikaze pilots were still departing in great numbers, and there were many reports every month of whole battalions being wiped out in the southern islands. To suddenly witness, right in front of me, the person most responsible for all these deaths was an event beyond my comprehension. "Unbelievable," I repeated to myself as I walked away through the ashes and debris.

The hypothetical conclusion I reached was that this unbelievable event was the product of a very long process, an ideological accumulation through which the Japanese people had come to value death over life. Nevertheless I was amazed at the sight of people kneeling down with their arms stretched out before them and their foreheads down in the rubble, weeping as they apologized again and again to the Emperor. There was no denying the extraordinary kindness of the people. What were the roots of this infinite kindness and how should it be viewed in the context of politics? Should politics be founded on the people's kindness? If not, such a ceremony would surely be impossible, whatever the reason for it.

I found it incomprehensible both from the perspective of the governing class and from that of the people. As I walked through the burned ruins of Tokyo twenty-five years ago, I turned these questions over and over in my mind. Whether I could understand it or not, the situation was quite clear: this was the essential relationship between the Emperor and the people. About that there was no room for doubt.

The next morning, the headline of the *Asahi Shimbun* announced: "His Majesty Inspects the Bombed Area." The front page of the newspaper was almost completely taken up with an article and photograph describing the inspection. The complicated kanji character used for "inspect" was one I had never seen before. I remember looking it up in the dictionary to find out how it should be read. The article reported that the motorcade had left the Imperial Palace at nine in the morning. The Emperor had first inspected the ruins of Tomioka Hachiman Shrine in Fukagawa, followed by Shiomi Bridge, Toyo Park, Onagigawa Bridge, Kinshicho, Oshiage, Komagata Bridge, and Tawaramachi. They returned via Ueno to the Imperial Palace at ten o'clock. The inspection tour took just one hour. If these "low city" neighborhoods of the Koto

district of the Shitamachi had not burned to the ground, it seems unlikely that they would ever have been favored with an Imperial inspection.



**The Emperor receives reports in the precincts of Tomioka Hachiman Shrine**

Normally if a nation suffers such a calamity, particularly one that is not natural but man-made and that is clearly the result of decisions made by its leaders, the ultimate responsibility for this should lie with those leaders. However, even if a terrible calamity were to reduce the whole of Japan to ashes and all the people, from top to bottom, were turned into refugees, I still could not help suspecting that this “system,” as we now call it, would still be maintained. Could we really expect a new Japan to come into being?

If this system was founded on the kindness of the people, to hell with responsibility for the consequences of political decisions! It was politics in form only. Surely there was nothing more dangerous than politics in appearance but not in reality. A layman such as myself could only guess whether Japan’s political scientists had done all they could to explain this absence of responsibility. It seems to me now that politics in Japan, whatever the system, inclines almost automatically and instinctively towards

this infinite expansion of form without content. This “politics” occasionally metamorphoses into theory and may even take on the character of a normative model. In this context, Ienaga Saburo's lawsuit and Konishi Makoto's trial have great significance.<sup>1</sup>

From March 18 onwards, during those last months of the war, those questions tormented me every day. Even today, a quarter of a century later, I have still not found an entirely satisfactory answer. But there is one thing I have come to understand. Although Kamo no Chomei and the many other outstanding Buddhist thinkers are not directly responsible for it, it is something that lies deep within the Japanese psyche. It may be described as the politicization of a feeling of the impermanence of all things (*mujokan*). At times of disaster in Japan, this politicization of the feeling of impermanence has been used again and again by the rulers of the time and accepted by the people who have been the victims of those calamities.

In *Hojoki*, Kamo no Chomei describes the people’s feelings of helplessness in the face of earthquakes: “Lacking wings, there could be no escaping into the air. Had we only been dragons, we might have fled to the clouds!” Chomei goes on to describe their plight even in “normal” times: “Follow the social rules, and they hem you in; fail to do so, and you are thought as good as crazy. Where can one be, what can one do, to find a little safe shelter, and a little peace of mind?”

The more you repeat these words like a Buddhist prayer, the more deeply it strikes you that this is the true nature of the world and there is nothing you can do about it. Such feelings undermine the desire to take part in a political demonstration or the will to fight against the system. Of course, it can be argued that such worldly things have nothing to do with the feeling of impermanence or the Buddhist philosophy of Chomei. I would say



that myself. However, even bearing that objection in mind, we still have to face the fact that these assumptions are deeply rooted in our patterns of thought.

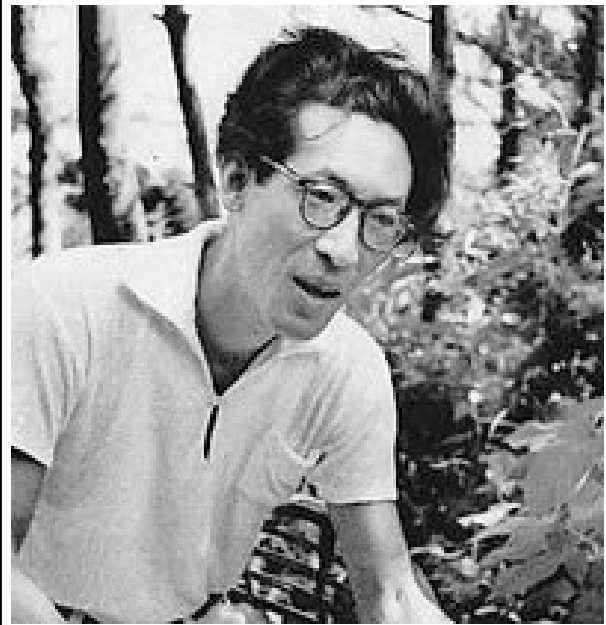


**Monument of the Emperor's inspection in the precincts of Tomioka Hachiman Shrine**

The poem on the monument, written by the Emperor, reads:

Whatever might happen to me  
I put an end to the war  
Thinking only of the people who  
were dying

## Hotta Yoshie (1918-1998)



Hotta Yoshie was born in the port town of Fushiki (now Takaoka) in Toyama Prefecture, on July 17, 1918. His father served as head of the Toyama prefectural assembly and his mother founded the first day nursery in Toyama. Since family members were shipping agents for the cargo ships that sailed the Japan Sea until the early Showa period, Hotta developed an international awareness from his childhood. From the age of fourteen, he spent a year living with an American missionary family, with whom he spoke only English. In 1936 he went to Tokyo to take a preparatory course for entrance to Keio University. He arrived in the capital on February 26, the day of the attempted military coup d'état by young army officers. This experience was deeply disturbing, making him aware that "the military could rebel against the state and the Emperor could have them put to death."<sup>2</sup> In 1940, Hotta graduated from Keio University, where he majored in French literature. In an autobiographical novel, he later described his discovery during his student days of an English translation of the writings of Lenin and their profound influence on him.<sup>3</sup> While at university

he contributed works of poetry and criticism to the literary journal *Hihyo* (Criticism). He frequently met novelists such as Dazai Osamu and Ibuse Masuji, who were members of the same music circle in Kichijoji.<sup>4</sup> In 1944 he was drafted into the army, but became seriously ill and was released from military service. On March 24, 1945, two weeks after the Great Tokyo Air Raid, Hotta went to work at the office of the Society for International Cultural Relations (predecessor of the Japan Foundation) in Shanghai, where he remained until the end of 1946. This period in Shanghai had a decisive impact on his life and literary career. The theme of dislocation both in Japanese-occupied China and Tokyo under US occupation was to become the central motif in his postwar novels. Literary historian Seiji M. Lippit argues that "occupation marks the site of Hotta's enduring concern with the corporeal and psychic subjection of human beings to the mechanisms of power."<sup>5</sup>

In 1951, Hotta was awarded the Akutagawa Prize, the most prestigious literary award in Japan, for his first novel *Hiroba no kodoku* (Loneliness in the Square). He was one of the first writers in postwar Japan to graphically describe atrocities committed by the Japanese army in Asia. His 1955 novel *Jikan* (Time) depicts the Nanking massacre from the perspective of a Chinese intellectual whose family is stranded in the city after its fall in December 1937. In spite of Hotta's prestige as a novelist, *Jikan* received relatively little attention or critical acclaim.

In 1956, Hotta traveled extensively in India and wrote a book about this experience the following year. From then on, he frequently visited foreign countries, working to promote the appreciation of Japanese literature overseas. In 1959, he was appointed president

of the Afro-Asian Writers' Association. Hotta's 1963 novel *Shinban* (Judgment), depicting the friendship between an American pilot who took part in the atomic bombings and a Japanese soldier responsible for atrocities in Manchuria, is the only one of his novels to be translated into English.<sup>6</sup> In the 1970s, Hotta became interested in Spain, which he viewed as the place where Western Europe meets the Third World. He wrote a four-volume study on the Spanish painter Goya, examining his work in the context of Spain in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He subsequently moved to Spain and lived there for ten years.

In view of Hotta's prominence in postwar Japanese literature, there has been a surprising lack of scholarly interest in his work. However, ten years after his death in 1998, a revival of interest came from a surprising quarter. In 2008, the Japanese animated film director, Hayao Miyazaki, announced that Studio Ghibli was planning to make an animated feature based on Hotta's *Personal Reflections on the Hojiki*. Miyazaki stated that Hotta was his favorite author: "He was like a rock towering in the ocean for me. Whenever I drifted and lost my way, I was saved by him."<sup>7</sup> However, nothing has been heard about this project since then.

In his series of literary essays 1937: *Jikan wa naze kesareta ka* (1937: Why Was Time Erased?), serialized in the weekly magazine *Shukan Kinyobi* in 2015, the critic and poet Henmi Yo explored Japan's memories of the war with China. Henmi pointed out that Hotta's novel *Jikan* was the inspiration for this work and quoted at length from it. In November 2015, *Jikan* was republished (with an afterword by Henmi) for the first time in sixty years.<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing, it is already in its third printing.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This refers to Ienaga Saburo's lawsuit against the Ministry of Education for censoring his high school history textbook and the trial of Konishi Makoto, a member of the Air Self-Defense Forces, who was arrested for anti-war activities.

<sup>2</sup> Hotta Yoshie, *Meguriaishi hitobito* (People I Have Met; 1993), Shueisha Bunko, 1999, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Wakakihi no shijintachi no shozo* (Portraits of Poets as Young Men), Shichosha, 1968. The book was *V.I. Lenin, Selected Works in Two Volumes* (1931).

<sup>4</sup> *Meguriaishi hitobito*, p. 186.

<sup>5</sup> Seiji M. Lippit, "Spaces of Occupation in the Postwar Fiction of Hotta Yoshie", *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 36:2, 2010, p. 294.

<sup>6</sup> *Judgment*, translated by Nokuko Tsukui, Intercultural Research Institute, Kansai Gaidai University, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Miyazaki mentions Hotta in an interview published in *Asia-Pacific Journal*, September 8, 2014. See also Matthew Penney, "[Miyazaki Hayao and the Asia-Pacific War](#)", *Asia-Pacific Journal*, 21 July 2013.

<sup>8</sup> *Jikan*, Iwanami Gendai Bunko, November 17, 2015.