

The Tattoos of Michinaga Ei and Nicholas II

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The summit of Mt. Inasa commands a breathtaking view of Nagasaki Harbor, the ragged coastline of Nomozaki and the scattering of islands half-erased by haze over the East China Sea. Low wooden houses creep up the hillside like a lush growth of ivy from the waterfront docks and warehouses. Called the taigan (opposite shore) by local residents, the Inasa neighborhood lies across the harbor from the main part of Nagasaki and has always played a secondary role in the city's history.

One evening in the mid-1920s a tall woman about sixty-five years of age opened the door into the women's side of Benten-yu, a public bath in the Akebono quarter of Inasa. She was wearing a starched cotton kimono of somber color and carried a small wooden tub with a towel and bar of soap under one arm. At a glance she seemed a typical neighborhood grandmother, perhaps the wife of a well-heeled shop owner or retired school teacher. But the long grey hair caught up casually on her head revealed a neck that was still unblemished and alluring, and the way she greeted the bath keeper and slipped out of her black lacquerware clogs told of a woman who had seen more of the world than the kitchens, markets and little social circles of Nagasaki.

"You haven't been along in ages," said the bath keeper politely.

"Yes," replied the woman as she stepped up onto the gleaming reed mat in the changing room. "I love coming to the bath but the climb back to my house has become so exhausting... I am getting old." The final comment was delivered with such a coquettish smile that it suggested just the opposite.

"Oh no, not you Michinaga-san, you will be young forever!"

Disrobing, the woman folded her kimono neatly in the rattan clothes basket and slid the basket into the rack on the wall. She was naked now except for a bandage around her left upper arm. As she turned to go into the bathroom, a little girl of perhaps three years old who had just emerged from the bath pointed at the bandage and asked, "Did you hurt yourself?" The child's mother quickly scolded her with a "shhhh!" and nodded apologetically, but the woman just smiled and went into the bathroom. When she was gone, the mother looked down at the little girl and said, "That was O-Ei-san. Don't you ever speak to her again."

Michinaga Ei was born in 1860 in a fishing village called Noboritate in Amakusa, an island group visible across Tachibana Bay from the town of Mogi near Nagasaki. The name "Amakusa," which literally means "Heavenly Grass," is an apt description of the islands with their green hills and history of Christian persecution. After losing her mother and father at the age of twelve, Ei came under the wing of a relative operating an inn in Mogi. She served as a babysitter and maid there for seven years before being shuttled off to the Volga, a restaurant on the waterfront in Inasa that catered exclusively to officers of the Russian navy. The restaurant had European tables, chairs and ornaments inside and served Russian cuisine, but it was housed in an old fashioned Japanese house with enough Oriental ambience to please the foreign clientele. The proprietor, Moro'oka Matsu, was a veteran Nagasaki geisha and relative of Ei's mentor in Mogi.

The blooming young woman of twenty quickly caught the attention of the Volga customers, and Moro'oka took advantage of Ei's popularity by placing her in charge of an officers' club that she

opened next door to the restaurant. This event marked the beginning of Michinaga Ei's lifelong association with Russia and her full-fledged study of the Russian language.

The Russia-Inasa connection harks back to 1853 when E. Putiatin, rear admiral of the Russian Imperial Navy, led a squadron of four ships into Nagasaki Harbor bearing official letters from the Czar and seeking the formation of a trade pact between Russia and Japan. The visit came only a month after Commodore Matthew Perry forced his "black ships" into Uraga Bay near Edo (Tokyo) and demanded the opening of Japan's doors to trade with the United States. The Tokugawa Shogunate, which had enough on its hands with the uproar in Uraga, kept Putiatin waiting in Nagasaki without an answer. With England and France taking the side of Russia's Turkish enemies in the Crimean War, meanwhile, Putiatin could not remain still for fear of attack by British or French ships. He sailed in and out of Nagasaki three times from July 1853 to March 1854, eliciting considerable curiosity among the Nagasaki population. The Japanese later poked fun at him in a song called *Buraburabushi* (the "Loaf Around Song"), which was a hit during the Meiji Period and remains today as one of Nagasaki's best known folk songs. During the second visit in December 1853 the Russian crews were allowed to disembark and to rest at Goshinji, a Buddhist temple on the Inasa hillside. The Japanese authorities chose Goshinji because the buildings and grounds were spacious and conveniently located, not to mention the fact that the temple had been used by the Chinese and Dutch as a burial ground for more than two centuries and so had had considerable experience with foreign guests.

Ivan Goncharov, secretary to Putiatin during the voyage and a renowned Russian author, described his first impressions of Nagasaki and first encounters with its people:

What is this? Stage scenery or reality? What a place! The hills near and far vie with each other as to which shall be greener. They crowd together one above another in an amphitheatre and are covered with little cedars and lots of other trees, though you cannot make out what they are. There is nothing terrifying, nature is everywhere smiling: behind the hills I suppose are laughing valleys and fields....

We looked curiously at the magnificent shores of the inlet past which we were rowing. Again I could not refrain from anger when looking at a spot where nature on her side had done all she could to give man the chance to apply his creative hand and work wonders, and where man had done nothing at all....

'Where is the town, then?'

'There it is,' my companions say.

'Is that all? Is there nothing at all behind the cape? Just that?'

We did not believe our eyes when we gazed at the huddle of grey, ill-favoured, one-storeyed houses. To the north, where I had supposed that there might be a continuation of the town, was nothing, a deserted coast, smallish hamlets, and scattered huts probably belonging to fishermen. On the capes that shut the inlet in were always the same worthless batteries and long, low buildings like barracks.

'What is the population of Nagasaki?' I once asked Baba Gorozaemon—through an interpreter, of course. He repeated the question in Japanese and looked at a second

colleague, who looked at a third, who in turn looked at a junior *baniosi*; the junior *baniosi* looked at an interpreter, and so the question and the look came back to Baba again, though without an answer.

‘Sometimes there are fewer,’ said Sadagora at last, ‘and sometimes there are more.’

There is an answer for you! They are afraid of everything and everything is forbidden to them. They give themselves away over trifles as prevaricators and that is a misfortune.

Despite Gonchorov’s negative impressions and the frustrating wait, the Russian-Japanese negotiations were conducted on a cordial basis and no force was shown on either side at any time during the prolonged meetings. And although still harboring reservations, Gonchorov acknowledges the refinement and civility of his odd-looking hosts:

Do not think that the ideas, words and manners of the Japanese had anything savage about them or anything that struck a European as strange. Except for their habit of blowing their noses on paper and hiding sweets...and for their dress and really absurd pigtails, there was nothing at all. In every other way these people are, if not the equals of Europeans, at a pretty high level; they are easy in their manners and pleasant in their address.

In 1858 Putiatin finally signed a diplomatic agreement with shogunal officials at Edo, paving the way for the establishment of a permanent Russian naval depot at Inasa in Nagasaki. During the same year the Russian frigate Askold docked here for repairs for a period of about ten months, only to lose about twenty members of its crew to an outbreak of cholera that also rampaged through the streets of Nagasaki and killed more than 700 citizens. The high death toll made it impossible to accommodate all the deceased in the Dutch Cemetery at Goshinji and thus necessitated the opening of a separate plot for the Russian navy. This was used continuously in subsequent decades and today contains about 200 gravestones and a Russian Orthodox chapel with a distinctive bulbous roof that remains as one of the most prominent reminders of Japanese-Russian exchange in Nagasaki. Although mostly forgotten in recent years, the Inasa Russian Cemetery was yanked out of obscurity in April 1991 when Mikhail Gorbachev called at the cemetery during what turned out to be his last trip overseas as Soviet president.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Russian naval vessels called at Nagasaki in increasing numbers and their crews poured out on shore leave, changing the Inasa neighborhood into a thriving “Russian Quarter.” This was due, on one hand, to the location of the naval depot in Inasa and, on the other, to a compromise reached between Russian naval doctors and the proprietors of the brothels in the famous Maruyama entertainment district in central Nagasaki. Fearing a scourge of syphilis, the doctors insisted that all prostitutes having contact with Russian sailors undergo an examination for venereal disease. The brothel owners condemned this as an insult to tradition and vehemently refused. An agreement was finally reached in 1860 when the Japanese physician Matsumoto Ryojun suggested the opening of a separate “Russian” brothel near the docks in Inasa and examinations for sailors and prostitutes alike.

When Michinaga Ei came to the officers’ club in 1880, the Inasa neighborhood already had dozens of souvenir shops, saloons, billiard halls and miniature shooting galleries hanging out signs in

Russian. Barkers stood on the streets clapping their hands and beckoning passing sailors with shouts of *zakhoditye! zakhoditye!*, while girls in kimonos with scarlet undergarments leaned out of the brothel windows in seductive poses. And despite their thought-provoking proximity to the foreign cemeteries at Goshinji, the houses of ill repute were never short of customers.

Ei's pluck and remarkable ability in Russian—not to mention her exceptional good looks—endeared her to the patrons of the club. At her first Christmas she delighted the Russians by decorating the dining room with handmade ornaments and a holly tree purchased from a local sake brewer. In March 1881, one of the commanders persuaded her to accompany him as a “valet” when his squadron left Nagasaki for Vladivostok. The ambiguity of this arrangement is typical not only of Ei's dealings with foreign men but of all her later adventures, and, indeed, it is the reason for the peculiar blend of admiration and derision with which she has always been viewed in Nagasaki.

In any case she apparently did not tag along passively. Before leaving Japan the astute Ei bought twenty yen worth of Omura pearls, which she had heard were in great demand in Europe, and sold these to an Italian jewelry broker in Vladivostok for a huge profit. She later used the money to finance a four-month trip down the Amur River and overland to Lake Baikal via Khabarovsk, which, needless to say, was an unprecedented adventure for a single Japanese woman.

Ei is said to have remained in Vladivostok for almost ten years thereafter, tinkering in various business ventures and enjoying the role of “Japanese flower” in Russian social circles, but the decade is cloaked in mystery. She returned to Nagasaki in September 1890, fluent in Russian, able in English and French, and perfectly at home with Occidental manners. Resuming her role as hostess to Russian officers at the Volga, she moved with two maids into a house on a low cliff on the edge of the Inasa neighborhood overlooking the harbor. Although it reflected the lifestyle Ei had enjoyed in Vladivostok, the unprecedented extravagance of an unmarried thirty year-old woman employing maids in an opulent private residence raised more than a few Nagasaki eyebrows.

Michinaga Ei's charm and language skills took on special significance in April 1891 when Nicholas, heir to the Russian throne, called at Nagasaki on the first leg of a tour of Japan. The czarévitch suffered through the obligatory official visits, including a sumptuous Japanese meal that included everything from wild duck soup to a crane fashioned from seaweed and a mysterious dish called “essence of lemon blossom,” but he also made several private excursions into the city. On one such occasion Nicholas visited Goshinji Temple and paid his respects at the Russian Naval Cemetery. He thanked the resident priest for his hospitality to the Russian navy and care for the cemetery. Then after a few hours of curio hunting, he called at the home of a local merchant with business connections in Russia. Ei was on hand, having been recruited to serve as hostess and interpreter during the dinner held in the prince's honor. Nicholas caused surprise at the party by asking for information about Nagasaki tattoo artists. He had read in travel books about the artistic beauty of Japanese tattoos, and like many other Europeans of his generation he wanted to have one as an exotic souvenir of his adventures in the Far East. Messengers were immediately dispatched from the house, and the following day two of Nagasaki's most skillful tattoo artists arrived at the flagship *Pamiat Azova* with the tools of their trade. Within hours Nicholas had colorful dragons climbing his arms.

Another outing began at about 8:00 p.m. on May 2 when Nicholas and his traveling companion Prince George of Greece boarded a cutter to the Inasa waterfront where Ei was waiting under the

lamplight at a predesignated spot. It seems that the trio then proceeded to the Volga to enjoy dinner, dancing and billiards in a private party room and that Nicholas and George stayed overnight in the mansion of a wealthy family nearby. Said Nagasaki historian Koga Jujiro about this nocturnal rendezvous: “There is much to be said about Ei in her early years. It was common knowledge at the time that she shared the Russian prince’s pillow and enjoyed his affection that night in Nagasaki.”

When the *Pamiat Azova* steamed out of Nagasaki Harbor on May 5, 1891, Ei was wearing the diamond necklace that she had received from Nicholas as a present. She perhaps pulled the necklace out of its box again –this time in shock–when only days later news that Nicholas had been attacked and injured by a would-be assassin in Otsu near Kyoto stunned the people of Nagasaki and the rest of the world.

Less than a year later Ei again made the journey to the continent, this time to Shanghai where she took up lodgings at the Hotel Paris. One evening she met the Russian consul and his wife at a ball in the French Concession and accepted their invitation to the horse races the following day, where in a flare of characteristic gambling intuition she won a handsome sum of money. When she left Shanghai Ei was not alone. Smitten with love and pity for an orphaned teenage girl who had been selling flowers on the street outside the Hotel Paris, she adopted the child and brought her back to Nagasaki as her own daughter, naming her Chiyo.

Ei used her savings and horse race winnings to finance the construction of a Western-style hotel called the *Vyesna* (Russian for “spring”) on a scenic elevated promontory near the Inasa seafront. Completed in November 1893, the hotel had 20 rooms with private baths and toilets, a large party room, billiard room and European kitchen, and the windows commanded an excellent view of Nagasaki Harbor. An inauguration ceremony and banquet were held in the party room to celebrate the occasion. Ei exuded her usual charm and exuberance but the attention of the guests was drawn to a remarkable change in her appearance: she was pregnant. When she gave birth to a son–named Takashi–in March the following year, Ei did not make any excuses for the illegitimacy of the child nor try to satisfy the curiosity of her many acquaintances about the identity of the missing father. The hard-headed, soft-hearted Michinaga Ei had no reservations about raising the child on her own. But as a single mother and independent businesswoman she cut a very unusual figure among her compatriots. This, after all, was a time when Japanese women had little choice but to be “moons shining by the light of another.”

As a result of Japan’s victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and the American acquisition of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War of 1898, Nagasaki enjoyed a burst of unprecedented prosperity during the decade spanning the turn of the century. The harbor bustled with so many trade vessels, coal barges, passenger ships and foreign naval squadrons that ship’s captains often complained about the difficulty of finding a place to anchor close to the landing docks. Nagasaki also flourished as the gateway to Unzen, which gained enormous popularity around this time as a summer resort for wealthy European and American residents of Shanghai, Hong Kong and other continental ports. The streets of the European Settlement were studded with hotels and trading offices, and the multinational community was thriving as never before. Nagasaki had also become the established winter anchorage of the Russian East Asian Fleet and was connected with Vladivostok by whaling, shipping and other joint business enterprises. The population of the city included a growing number of Russian merchants, consulate employees and shopkeepers. One of the Russian shopkeepers was I.T. Buhonkoff, who opened what he claimed was Japan’s first

Russian store on a side street in Sagarimatsu (present-day Matsugae-machi) in 1898.

The Vyesna, like the Volga before it, did a booming business as a resting place and watering hole for high-ranking Russian naval officers. Ei's popularity and fame grew to the point that her patrons called her "the mother of the Russian navy in Japan." The hotel was at the peak of its prosperity in 1900 when Ei moved into a new house high on the hillside in the Inasa neighborhood. Motivated partly by a chronic lung condition, she entrusted the management of the Vyesna to her employees and opened a small Japanese-style guest house beside her new abode. Nestled under the arms of old trees growing in a Shinto Shrine higher up the hill, the buildings overlooked the harbor and beyond it the old neighborhoods of Nagasaki stretching up the river valleys. But Ei's life of ease in this quiet retreat was cut short by trouble brewing between Russia and Japan.

The Sino-Japanese War had tested Japan's modern army on the battlefield for the first time and had ended in a resounding victory for the Japanese. Japan won possession of the Liaodong Peninsula, Formosa and the Pescadores Islands as well as a huge indemnity. Nicholas II, who by this time had ascended to the throne, was vying for Russian access to the Pacific. After intervening diplomatically to compel Japan to return the Liaodong Peninsula to China in exchange for a higher indemnity, he obtained rights from the Qing government to extend the Trans-Siberian railway across Manchuria to Vladivostok via Harbin with a branch line to Dairen. Then in 1898, he seized the peninsula despite his guarantee of Chinese sovereignty. To Russia the Liaodong Peninsula provided a vital passageway to the Pacific and also a strategic warm-water port at Lushun (Port Aurther). The taking of Liaodong, however, threw Russia onto a collision course with Japan.

As tension mounted between the two countries, Nicholas sent his minister of war A.N. Kuropatkin to Japan in June 1903 to confer with government officials. On his way home, Kuropatkin stopped at Nagasaki and spent several days in Ei's guest house, perhaps seeking out the famous innkeeper's sympathy to soothe the effects of the cold reception he had received in Tokyo. By now the Russian flag was nowhere visible in Nagasaki Harbor, and the Vyesna and other establishments in the Inasa neighborhood were empty save for a trickle of non-Russian customers.

That summer Kuropatkin recommended that Russia abandon its projects in Manchuria and restore Lushun to the Chinese. But extremists in the imperial court and the momentum of commercial interests in the far East negated his proposals. On February 8, 1904, the Japanese navy took the Russian Far East Fleet by surprise at Lushun, inflicting serious damages and blockading the harbor. Thus the Russo-Japanese War began, much to the chagrin of Michinaga Ei and others whose livelihoods depended on goodwill between the two countries. Responding to the attack on Lushun, Nicholas sent Kuropatkin to replace the inept E.I. Alekseev as commander of his Far East forces. But Kuropatkin proved to be an indecisive strategist, and his passive tactics brought disaster to the Russian troops.

In January 1905, Lieutenant General A.M. Stossel surrendered Lushun to the Japanese and was brought to Nagasaki under guard with his family and several war orphans. The group arrived in Nagasaki Harbor on January 14 on the French mail steamer *Australien*, and Ei's guest house was designated as their Nagasaki lodging place. The steep climb, it seems, was an arduous ordeal for the Russians. Mrs. Stossel for one was so fat that she had to be assisted up the steps to the guest house. Stossel spent three days of rest under Ei's care before setting sail for Europe and a court martial at the hands of his compatriots. Later, as the war wound to a conclusion, the Inasa

neighborhood came back to life briefly when waves of Russian POWs passed through the port. Instead of imprisonment the soldiers were billeted in private homes, a situation that probably has few precedents in the history of war. They were free to come and go, and every evening the local merchants set up night stalls and miniature shooting galleries for their amusement in the garden at Goshinji Temple. The battle-weary soldiers must have felt as though they had fallen, not into enemy hands, but into the lap of some benevolent neutral state.

The war ended in humiliating defeat for Russia in September 1905. At almost the same time a band of Russian expatriates led by the former medical doctor and political activist Nikolai Russell made Nagasaki a base for their activities, stirring up anti-czarist feelings among the prisoners-of-war and distributing inflammatory literature on ships carrying the soldiers home. In April 1906, the band founded a Russian-language newspaper called *Volya* in a back street house in the Nagasaki European Settlement, using this as a vehicle for the propagation of populist philosophy and “objective” information about the crimes of the czar’s government. Working from the safe oasis of Nagasaki, the zealots were able to communicate ideas to a wide readership in the ports of Japan and China. In March 1907 they decided to move their base of activity back onto the continent and *Volya* ceased publication after less than a year in print, but despite its short duration, the newspaper had played an instrumental—albeit indirect—role in the great political changes in Russia.

The Russo-Japanese War marked the beginning of a decline from which the Nagasaki European Settlement would never recover. Foreign residents moved away to the more prosperous and centrally located ports of Kobe and Yokohama, and Nagasaki’s reduced role in international trade forced one hotel and trading firm after another into bankruptcy. The *Vyesna* was among the establishments that pulled down their signs. But Michinaga Ei did not completely give up hope that there would be a revival of the Russian presence in Nagasaki; not, at least, until the summer of 1918 when news of the murder of Nicholas II splashed across the front page of her newspaper. After renouncing his throne in the midst of intense political turmoil, Nicholas had been detained by revolutionaries while preparing to flee to England. The rebels, it is said, identified the czar by one of his most prominent physical features: the dragons tattooed on his arms. In the early hours of July 30, Nicholas and his family were brutally murdered in the basement of a house in the western Siberian town of Sverdlovsk, and the bodies were dumped into an abandoned mine shaft.

In the 1920s, Ei relinquished all her business activities to her son Takashi and adopted daughter Chiyo and sought out the peace of quiet retirement. She lived the life of a typical elderly lady of the neighborhood, serving on the women’s auxiliary at Goshinji Temple, walking to the market and public bath, and spending hours alone tinkering in her garden. She died of hepatitis in 1927 at the age of 67. In her will she included two requests; one that her grave be located on the Inasa hillside overlooking Nagasaki Harbor, and the second that her body be cremated without removing the bandage from her arm. Both requests were faithfully followed out.

Brian Burke-Gaffney. “The Tattoos of Michinaga Ei and Nicholas II.” *Crossroads: A Journal of Nagasaki History and Culture*, no. 1 (Summer 1993), 91–106.