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The City That Disappeared Twice

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Downtown Tokyo following the earthquake in 1923 (left), and the main street of the Ginza district today.

TOKYO RISING
The City Since the Great Earthquake.
By Edward Seidensticker.
Illustrated.
362 pp. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf. $24.95.

By Jay McInerney

JAMES JOYCE once declared that if turn-of-the-century Dublin were to vanish from the face of the earth it could be rebuilt on the basis of "Ulysses." In "Tokyo Rising," Edward Seidensticker seems to have exercised a similar, nonfictional ambition with regard to his adopted city of Tokyo. In fact, Tokyo *has* disappeared twice in this century — once after the great earthquake of 1923 and again after the American bombings of 1944-45.

A sequel to the excellent "Low City, High City: Tokyo, 1867-1923," "Tokyo Rising" is an informal and contentious history of the Japanese capital from the time of the earthquake to the present. Mr. Seidensticker, whose distinguished translations from Japanese literature include an excellent version of "The Tale of Genji" and Junichiro Tanizaki's masterpiece, "The Makioka Sisters," is a confessed fan of the Low City, the eastern flatlands that were the center of popular and mercantile culture in 19th-century Edo (now Tokyo). The new book disapprovingly documents the drift of the city westward, toward Shinjuku, the gaudy district that will soon house the new city government offices.

"Tokyo Rising" is best when it is most anecdotal, as when Mr. Seidensticker touches on the development of the retail industry. A large step toward the triumph of the Western-style department store was taken after the earthquake, when the new department stores began to let customers keep their shoes on inside. Previously, great logjams had occurred at entrances and exits while customers changed from street shoes to the traditional slippers. "Simple and obvious it may seem today, but it must have taken getting used to. Never before through all the centuries had shod feet ventured beyond the entranceway."

A fire at a major department store in 1933 turned out to have a major impact on women's dress, particularly underwear. Traditional Japanese dress did not include snug-fitting undergarments, and several of the shopgirls who died in the blaze at the Shirokiya department store did so because, modestly using one hand to keep their skirts from flying up, they were unable to hang on to ropes long enough to descend safely to the ground. So they fell to their deaths. "From about the time of the earthquake, advertising men had been pushing Western underdress for women, which they made a symbol of sexual equality. But a disaster like the Shirokiya fire was needed to effect decisive change."

A disaster like the Shirokiya fire is sometimes needed to revive an expiring narrative. Nonspecialists and readers who have not spent a great deal of time and money in Tokyo will find themselves skipping over paragraphs of demographic minutiae, struggling to keep track of the names of city wards and neighborhoods. Swatches of the text read like footnotes: "A quarter of the requisitioned houses were in what is now Minato Ward and before 1947 was the three southern wards of the old city, Shiba, Akasaka, and Azabu." It's difficult to know what to make of this kind of information, even if one is vaguely familiar with the place names.

Though sometimes painstakingly thorough on local politics and economic trends, Mr. Seidensticker is more interested in, and interesting on, what happens after sunset. "Opinions will differ as to whether the nightclub entertainer and the bar girl of our day are as accomplished as was the geisha of old, but the geisha has gradually yielded to them." Mr. Seidensticker's musings on the quality of prewar night life in Ginza as opposed to that in the Asakusa ward, for instance, are charmingly arcane, and studded with amusing details: "In the early days of stripping (not mere posing), more than half the girls in Asakusa rid themselves of Japanese dress. In Ginza Western dress prevailed. . . . Asakusa soon adopted the Ginza way. Western dress comes off more quickly than Japanese."

MR. SEIDENSTICKER loves the demotic culture of the merchant classes, which was Edo's contribution to the national heritage. The ancient capital, Kyoto, was the home of the aristocracy, who patronized the austere traditional arts of Noh theater, tea ceremony and flower arranging. (To the uninitiated, the first can be slightly more exciting than watching paint dry.)

The rice merchants and silk traders of the new capital helped create gaudier — some would say more vital — forms of art and entertainment such as ukiyoe, the brilliantly colored wood-block prints that proved so influential with Western Post-Impressionists, and Kabuki, which is to the monochromatic Noh theater what ukiyoe is to the pen-and-ink drawing. Mr. Seidensticker's previous book traced the rise of these and other arts, including the arts of the geisha (those of the bedroom being among the least of these). In this volume he documents the decline of most of what he loved in Edo.

As recently as 10 years ago Tokyo still had, to my eyes, a provincial ambiance. Foreigners could still elicit curious stares and comments, and it was by no means easy to find, say, a decent French or Italian meal. Visiting a few months ago, I found the city had transformed itself into an international metropolis. No one, however, would call it beautiful or even charming. It looks more like a hypertrophied Houston than a Kyoto. In their postwar rush to the future, the Japanese seem to have abandoned much of their esthetic and historical sensibility. Mr. Seidensticker's history of Tokyo is a loving elegy to a lost city. □

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At the Low Point

The days just after the surrender were very hard ones. When a middle-aged or aging Japanese remarks upon the terrible time, one must listen carefully to know which time is meant. One may instinctively suppose it to be the last months of the war, the time of the bombings, but for many the really terrible time was the first winter after the war, a time of cold, disease, and hunger. Typhus was the worst plague. There were almost ten thousand cases of it in Tokyo Prefecture during the winter of 1945 and 1946. . . . Typhus bespeaks lice and unclean bodies, very distressful to the well-washed Japanese. In those days not even a good hot bath was easy to come by. The city has always had fleas and chinches in ample numbers, but lice are a different matter.

A tenth of the populace that clung to the city through that winter lived in such emergency places as air-raid shelters and warehouses. The underground passages at Ueno Station, at that time the most considerable in the city, though they do not bear comparison with the honeycombs that have been dug since, had the largest and most famous accumulation of beggars and vagrants in the city. From time to time they were rounded up, and ineffective attempts made at dispersal. On a night in mid-December 1945, some twenty-five hundred persons were taken in. . . .

Students sat and shivered in their overcoats in unheated classrooms, professors stood and shivered. An office in one of the best buildings left to the Japanese, such as the Marunouchi Building or the Bank of Japan, might be heated only by a charcoal brazier or a scattering of them, to which typists would turn from time to time to thaw their stiffened fingers. The bravery of dancers in unheated theaters . . . was something to arouse admiration. Everything was rationed. One had to have coupons to eat in a restaurant. The cod and the sweet potato were the staples. Many a Japanese of a certain age cannot look at either without shuddering.

From "Tokyo Rising."