

Diary Entries of Ishikawa Kōyō, March 9-10, 1945

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Friday, March 9, 1945

Clear skies, strong wind

Today the weather was good, but a strong wind blew throughout the day. The wind kicked up ash and dust in the burned-out districts and the sky in the distance was light brown.

From the morning I was in the darkroom enlarging photographs, but because I had to go out to the office every time the telephone rang or a messenger arrived from a police station, I didn't make any progress. The photography staff were all engaged in other work and I had to do everything myself.

The next day, March 10, was Army Day. The troops were to parade in Yoyogi before the Emperor mounted on his horse, "White Snow." As usual, I was going to attend the ceremony in morning dress and take the official photographs, but the parade was cancelled.

I finished my work at around 5:00 p.m. and was thinking of returning home. However, I had a feeling that we might get a big air raid tonight because there hadn't been any for four days since the nighttime incendiary raid by nine B-29s in Edogawa on March 5. Before heading home, I decided to check in on the air defense headquarters in the basement.

When there was no air raid alert in progress, it was quiet in the basement. My colleague Lieutenant Suzuki was on duty. When he saw me, he said half-jokingly, "Tonight the enemy is coming in force, so you should stick around. Better that than going home and having to come back." I knew he wanted me to stay because he felt lonely there on his own, but I had the same premonition as him and decided not to go home. I phoned the police department to inform them I would be staying and spent the evening chatting with Suzuki over dinner.

I entered the night duty room at around 10:30 p.m., lay down and listened to the music on the radio. Suddenly the broadcast was interrupted by the unpleasant buzzer they used to signal an air-raid alert. Then the music resumed as if nothing had happened. I was sure the alert would be followed by an air-raid warning, so I got myself ready, ran up to the photography room on the fifth floor to pick up my camera and film, and hurried down to the air defense headquarters in the basement.

Just after I got there, the air-raid alert was lifted. Suzuki and I looked at each other with relief and I decided to go home after all. At that very moment, we suddenly received emergency calls from Suzaki, Komatsugawa, Ryogoku, and Terajima police stations announcing that several dozen enemy planes had dropped countless incendiary bombs and fires were flaring up everywhere. The air-raid siren had still not sounded. It was 12:07 a.m.

Then we heard the radio announcement: "Eastern Army Headquarters

information. Enemy targets approaching the Kanto region from the sea in the east. All citizens on close alert.”

In no time the air defense headquarters was a hive of activity as staff from the deputy superintendent-general downwards arrived on the scene. Telephone calls came in one after another from district air-raid observation corps, police stations, fire stations, and local air defense headquarters. The experienced staff always seemed to know which telephone was ringing.

I sat in the chair behind Chief Superintendent Hara, listening to everything that was going on in that highly charged atmosphere. The next announcement came on the radio. “Eastern Army Headquarters information. 110 enemy planes attacking the Tokyo area. Heavy bombing is anticipated in this strong night wind. All military personnel, government officials, and civilians are expected to resist bravely.” The faces of the headquarters staff momentarily froze with tension.

I went up to the roof to take a look. My steel helmet rattled in the howling wind. The members of the observation corps were staring in amazement at the sky in the east. Several beams of light from searchlights pierced the night’s sky, seeking out the enemy planes. The ground below was completely dark and only the silhouettes of the buildings were visible. Occasionally the headlight beams of cars entering or leaving the police headquarters could be seen on the road beneath us.

Where would the enemy attack? In this fierce wind, I shuddered with the certain knowledge that wherever they dropped bombs tonight, fires would immediately break out and the ensuing firestorms would bring death and devastation in their wake.

Saturday, March 10, 1945

Clear skies, strong northerly wind

The main force of about 130 B-29s, which were supposed to have returned south far beyond the Boso Peninsula, swept in and conducted low-altitude incendiary raids in the Koto district at around 12:25 a.m. The searchlights picked up their silver bodies and we could clearly see the anti-aircraft shells exploding around them. Just as I was thinking “it’s come at last,” the sky above the Koto district turned crimson, announcing the outbreak of large fires.

I ran down the stairs from the roof to the air defense headquarters in the basement and gazed at the large map of the Metropolitan district on the wall. On its surface, countless red and blue lamps were lit, showing that incendiary bombs were already falling in Honjo, Fukagawa, Edogawa, and Asakusa wards.

I went up to Chief Superintendent Hara and told him I was going directly to the bombed-out area. Hara took me firmly by the hand and said, “So you’re going? Tonight’s air raid is different from before. Take good care of yourself, don’t die, and come back in one piece.” The Chief Superintendent was always considerate and concerned about his staff’s safety, but it was unusual for him to speak in this way.

I hurried to the parking lot at the back of the building and started up the engine of my old Chevrolet, in which I had weaved my way through fierce fires many times before. A motorcycle messenger from the air defense headquarters set off with me. As I was driving at full speed down Showa Road, fire trucks and police patrol vehicles overtook me, their sirens wailing. When I got to the Asakusabashi crossroads, I was confronted

with a gruesome spectacle—a conflagration of raging flames swirling in the wind. At Ryogoku Bridge, I saw an endless stream of escaping people coming towards me over the bridge from the other side. The congestion and confusion defy description. A policeman was shouting shrilly as he tried to guide the crowds, women were screaming, and air-raid wardens were barking instructions. I couldn't make any further headway in the car, so I parked it beside the police box. I slowly forced my way over the bridge through the surging mass of people and finally made it to the entrance of Ryogoku Police Station.

The police station was surrounded by raging fires and the hot wind was blowing so relentlessly that I couldn't open my eyes. Looking up at the sky, I saw that the crimson flames were reflected on the huge white fuselages of the enemy B-29s as they cruised above at low altitude. As if that wasn't enough, countless clusters of incendiary bombs were still falling from above.

The lights in the police station had gone out but it was still bright in the light of the swirling flames outside. The messenger arrived in the police chief's office to report the current situation. He had clearly had a rough time getting there. His uniform was in tatters, his face scorched black, and his eyes were sparkling. As he made his report to the police chief, the flames outside were reflected on his face through the window.

The police chief said to me, "There's nothing more we can do here. Get away as fast as you can." I told him to take care and left the building, but the raging fires and fierce wind bore down on me. I was too preoccupied with getting out of there alive to think about taking photographs. Whichever way I looked it was a sea of fire. I found a place a little less exposed to the wind, crouched down and crawled along the road. As the fires burned ever more fiercely they whipped up strong winds which in turn stoked the flames, burning many people to death as they frantically tried to escape. I saw several people fall and die helplessly in front of me, but there was nothing I could do for them. Their bodies rolled along the road like sacks of potatoes in the rushing stream of fire, passing by with a strange howling sound. In that torrent of fire, countless futons and other belongings were turned into balls of flames and swept along. I saw the raging flames gutting a building, leaving just the roof intact. As the blizzard of sparks and embers blew down over me, I wondered how long I could last.

I was already prepared for death, but to die there like that without a struggle was just unbearable. I could have just closed my eyes and accepted my fate, but I told myself I must not die. In that deadly whirlwind of flames, my police colleagues were still making desperate efforts to save as many people as they could under this fierce attack by the barbaric enemy. If they were determined to beat the odds, I too must fight to survive rather than just sitting here waiting for death. Boiling over with rage, I got up and found shelter behind a collapsed stone wall from the smoke and blasts of hot air that were scorching my face and burning my eyes.

In the sky above, as if they were mocking us, the B-29s were still flying serenely through the black smoke at such low altitude that they almost seemed within my grasp. In my fury at being unable to grab them and throw them to the ground, I yelled 'You bastards!' but no sound came from my mouth.

I don't remember where or how far I crawled after that. The fires were still burning furiously and the sky was crimson when I noticed that the enemy planes had gone. Through the smoke, I saw that the sky was suffused with a pale light. At that moment I knew at last that I was in the land of the living.

There were several other survivors around me. I couldn't help weeping at the sight of them. I was not sad but overjoyed that they had managed to live through the inferno. I wanted to embrace them and cry out, "Comrades, we must advance! All our lines of retreat have been reduced to ashes and now we can only advance. That is the only road to victory."

Their faces were scorched black, their hair and eyebrows burned, their eyes inflamed by the smoke and ashes, and their wrists swollen dark red by burns. Their clothes were in shreds and covered in holes made by the sparks. I was in the same state, but I somehow pulled myself together and made my way to the scorching hot road where fires were still burning furiously.

All along the tramway, the overhead wires were hanging down like spiders' webs, and the iron frames of burned-out trams looked like huge birdcages. Last night's strong wind had blown the smoke away from the smoldering ruins. I threaded my way through the heaps of charred corpses on Kototoi Bridge to Hanakawado in Asakusa. When I arrived at the police box at the foot of Ryogoku Bridge, I found that my abandoned Chevrolet had been turned into a skeleton of charred metal. I staggered on in the direction of the Metropolitan Police Department.

A man with a dirty bandage over his eyes passed by, helped by a middle-aged woman with burns on her legs and a student who seemed to be their son. They were followed by a man clad in civil defense corps uniform pulling a handcart containing an old man with a blood-stained cloth over his head. I could hardly bring myself to look at them.

I finally arrived at the police department just before noon. The doctor from the department's medical office was out on the road in front of the building, tending to wounded passers-by. After he washed my eyes, I reported to the chief of the administration division. The chief and his staff were very relieved that I was safe. A colleague told me that the chief had asked many times whether I had returned. I was so moved that I was lost for words.

After resting a while and eating a rice ball brought by a colleague, I went up to the roof. The Department of Justice and Naval Department directly in front of the building had both burned to the ground and were still smoldering. The Tokugokan martial arts hall on the western side of the building had also been reduced to ashes and the Army Accounting Department next to it was still on fire. Countless pipe containers of the incendiary bombs dropped the night before were strewn about on the roof.

At about 2:00 p.m., I went with security chiefs Kawai and Okada to observe the damage in Asakusa and Honjo. The roads were covered with abandoned household goods, bicycles, and carts, all burned and scattered about. The charred bodies of the dead – it was impossible to tell whether they were men or women – lay scattered everywhere. In a corner that people apparently thought offered shelter from the flames, the victims had fallen on top of one another to form a mountain of corpses. A hand pump used by the neighborhood association lay burned on the ground, its nozzle still pointing towards the fires – a poignant testimony to citizens' gallant but hopeless firefighting efforts. Dragging my heavy legs, I staggered through Kikukawa, Morishita-cho and Komagata, forcing my blinded eyes open to witness the devastation around me. I took photographs of the charred bodies on the roads, bodies of women and children, and bodies piled up in heaps. As I pointed my mud-covered Leica at the corpses of all those people who had died in

deep resentment, I imagined I heard an invisible voice rebuking me from above. My hands trembled and I could only press the shutter button weakly. But as long as I was alive, I had to keep taking those photographs to fulfill my mission, and to do that I had to be hard-hearted. When the work was finished, we put our hands together in prayer for the victims and went on our way.

How many hours was it since I had stood on the bank of the Sumida River looking out over the devastated Koto district? Flying lower than ever before, the B-29s had descended to drop their bombs again and again. With the bright-red flames reflected on their huge fuselages and four engines, they had looked like winged demons from hell. As I gazed at the burned-out ruins and thought how many thousands of my fellow countrymen had perished there, I was overcome with rage and pity.

The district was in the same state as I had left it that morning. The piles of dead bodies were too awful to look at. Among them injured people walked with sticks and others seemed to be looking for relatives. The Asakusa Kannon Hall, which had miraculously escaped the fires after the Great Kanto Earthquake, had burned to the ground and white smoke was billowing out of the windows of the Higashi Honganji Temple and the Matsuya department store.

When we arrived at Suzaki Police Station, we found the charred remains of Police Chief Tanisue sitting in his chair in his office with his child on his knee and his sword at his side. Only the iron frames of the chair remained. The burned corpses of other police officers were lying here and there inside the station. In all, 39 police officers including the chief had perished in the fires. A generous and open-hearted man, Police Chief Tanisue was a close acquaintance of mine who often dropped in at the police headquarters photography room. Seeing him like that, I broke down and wept. Security chief Kawai and I put our hands together to pray for the souls of the police chief and his officers. Then we returned to the car and arrived back at the Metropolitan Police Department at 5:20 p.m.

In front of the building, a dozen rented trucks were lined up with flags attached to them indicating the names of the various police stations. They were full of uniformed policemen who had been assigned the task of disposing of the dead bodies. The trucks were also loaded with biscuits and canned foods for people in the stricken areas.

I got back home at around 8:00 p.m. Without saying anything, I went straight to bed and slept the sleep of the dead.