

By DONALD RICHIE

After the War

It is just after the war — August 1945. The Emperor had spoken over the air. "No one quite understood (his) words as they issued from the loudspeaker in a strangely distorted, high-pitched voice . . . Some of those standing close to the loudspeaker thought they had seen the Emperor's breath causing a vibration in the piece of cloth that covered its round opening."

In a few days the radio was again carrying weather reports — "the first weather reports in four years." However, a few people were still sharpening bamboo poles to serve as spears against the victorious invader; "in many of the gardens, people dug holes at night where they buried old ceramic bowls and antique scrolls that they had wrapped in layers of oilpaper and packed in kiri-wood boxes;" and an appeal was made to women in the geisha quarters: "They must be spiritually prepared to satisfy the lusts of the conquerors."

In the meantime, the Koreans in their quarters "had been celebrating Japan's defeat since the day of capitulation," and not a few Japanese, hearing "rumors that the Americans were going to introduce Christianity as the official state religion," began crowding the churches.

In the meantime life continued, though with many changes. A local school teacher who during the war had spoken of nothing but duty now talked only of freedom. "Though she constantly spoke about the unfolding of one's own self, what she really expected was blind obedience. She hadn't changed in the slightest, she had merely exchanged her old vocabulary for a new one."

This is the observation of 10-year-old Saya through whose eyes we see the half-year fol-

lowing the defeat of Japan. A wise child, daughter of a Shinto priest in Kyoto, she experiences the changes she sees and tries to make some sense of them.

When the first of the conquerors arrives they turn out to be less fierce than expected. The local pawnbroker who had been sharpening bamboo spears now shamefacedly puts them away, saying that "next spring I'll use them as beanpoles." The only serious mayhem caused by the Americans is their indiscriminate distribution of chewing gum. When people discovered that they could not get it off their fingers and that it stuck to tatami matting, they became convinced that "the Americans were handing out chewing gum in order to drive the Japanese mad." In the end a group got together, dug a hole in the garden, and spit their gum into it.

There had been, however, rumors of something terrible happening to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Soon the rumors were confirmed, though just what had happened remained for a long time unknown since the Allies had lowered a "security" blanket. Consequently bits of information took odd shapes.

For example, there were many orphaned children, all over Japan, and a movement started to adopt some of them. But no one wanted any orphaned children from the two atom-bombed cities. "They look healthy and then lay down and die . . . no one wants to have anything to do with them. Understandable, I suppose."

Saya tries to make sense of all of this, but she has her own problems. If Japan is experiencing an enormous sundering of East and West, of old and new, she too is experiencing a similar dichotomy — a small paradigm of what her country is undergoing.

It is her parents. Her pre-occupied priest father is searching for knowledge and her self-centered mother, dissatisfied, seeks only to alienate Saya from him. The girl herself, wishing to love both parents, is torn.

But she early recognizes that knowledge is a tool, one she can defend herself with as well, a weapon. Seeking to make some sense of her world she turns to Christianity and is much drawn to the child Jesus. He "must have been an intelligent, fearless boy. It was a pity that, apart from that scene with the Pharisees, the Bible contains so little about his youth."

This fruitful identification is cut short by the pastor himself. "He said men must be grateful to God . . . he who truly understood the love of God could not fail to be grateful. But he who did not accept the love of God would surely be punished sometime or other. Gratitude or punishment. Promises of love and threats." The intelligent child makes a connection. "Just like Mother, Saya thought."

Her father alike can offer no consolation. "No one knows the answer. You do not. I do not. The Buddhists do not. The Christians do not. We are all searching for an answer. We do not even know that there is an answer." He does, however, give Saya an assurance: "There is only the certainty that each life is a rounded, unique event in nature, that nature takes back life and only the memory remains." It might be thought that this is not enough, but it is — it suffices.

And here ends the account of Saya, a crucial half year in her young life. Through her eyes we have seen the dislocated society in which she lived and experienced the abrupt shift in its values. Not

everyone survived, but Saya did.

And continued to thrive, think. The author of this striking account, Hisako Matsubara, was herself born and grew up in Kyoto. She was also the daughter of a Shinto priest and later studied comparative religion at university. She might also have been 10 or so in 1945. Thus, though this account is a novel it is also, think, at least partially autobiographical.

If so, then Saya went on to have very enriched and an enriching life. Mrs. Matsubara went to live in Cologne with her husband, the physicist Friedemann Ferund. There over the years, she became so proficient in German that she had her own column in the Cologne paper, *Die Zeit*. Her three novels (including this one under review today) and her five nonfiction books were all written in German.

Little Saya learned English in occupied Kyoto and felt a though a new world was opening before. Grown Hisako learned German in Cologne and a new world did indeed open before her.

One of Mrs. Matsubara's novels, *The Samurai*, became a bestseller in Europe and has been translated into eight languages. One of the reasons might be accessibility of Japanese thought revealed within the confines of a European language. But another certainly is her ability to render impressions, indicate by detail, and then connect these to the large pattern of her work. A Japanese way of seeing is wed to a German way of writing. And now again translated, this time in English, this very fine novel available to us.

CRANES AT DUSK. By Hisako Matsubara. Translated from the German by Leila Vennewitz. The Dial Press, New York, 1985. Pp. 253. \$15.95.