

OFFBEAT OREGON

Part 3: Matsuoka allies with Nazis

Editor's note: This is the third in a three-part series on Oregon-raised Yosuke Matsuoka, who became the foreign minister of Imperial Japan.

BY FINN J.D. JOHN
When Yosuke Matsuoka accepted his appointment as Imperial Japan's foreign minister, it was the fulfillment of a dream for him.



A postcard from Imperial Japan showing Yosuke Matsuoka meeting with Benito Mussolini in Rome in January 1933.

bring a reluctant America to the aid of the beleaguered British.

As far as I know, there isn't any direct evidence that Roosevelt's people started tugging on that tripwire.

Matsuoka's tenure as foreign minister ended three months later, in July 1941. Convinced the U.S. was trying to bait Japan into war, he'd become something of a loose cannon.

Kono's government only lasted a few months after that. Tensions with the United States got worse and worse.

He was replaced with Tojo. And, of course, Tojo took the country straight to war, taking special care to make sure the Nazis would back Japan up.

On the morning of the Pearl Harbor attack, Matsuoka heard the news on the radio, like everyone else. Initially he was exhilarated, but a day later the situation had sunk in a bit more.

Matsuoka spent the war years struggling with the tuberculosis that would shortly kill him. By the time the two atomic bombs had been detonated on Japanese soil, he was in obvious decline.

And so the war ended with Japan utterly supine, and with Matsuoka nearly on his deathbed. He finally succumbed to his tuberculosis at age 66 in June 1946 while in prison.

Yosuke Matsuoka was a product of his time. But more than that, he was a product of another time, and another place — of the late 19th century in one of the roughest, least-refined parts of the American frontier.

And it showed. Just after the war's end, a Japanese reporter asked him what Americans were like. This was his response:

"Now assuming that you are walking on a small path in a field, which is so narrow that only one person can pass through, and an American comes from the op-

posite direction," he said. "You are facing each other and neither side is willing to yield his right of way. Soon becoming impatient, the American will clench his fist and sock you in the jaw. Taken by surprise you may lower your head and let him pass by. Next time when you meet him on the same path, he will simply raise his fist. He considers that the best solution."

He continued: "On the other hand, if you do not retreat the first time, and engage in a counterattack, the American will be shocked and take another look at you. 'Well, this fellow knows what he is doing.' So recognizing, he will become your best friend."

Responding to this quote, David Lu, Matsuoka's biographer, writes, "This was the America of cowboys, of confrontation at high noon and of the Wild West. And this image of the bygone era acquired in the still-underdeveloped Pacific Northwest was to govern Matsuoka's thinking when he negotiated with the United States."

As evidenced by the fact that he was still thinking this way in 1945, after it was all over and his "punch the cowboy and he will become your pal" strategy had failed again and again and again, Matsuoka never really learned

the lesson. And yet: Is it possible that the crafty old diplomat was actually right?

Certainly not in his own lifetime, but in ours, Japan has become many Americans' favorite foreign country. In fact, according to Gallup's annual World Affairs poll earlier this year, 82 percent of Americans regard Japan "mostly favorably" or "very favorably."

As the rawness of the wounds of the war has faded to a memory, a certain admiration and respect for an uncommonly gutsy old adversary remains. In fact, that analogy of the American cowboy and his Japanese new best friend sitting side by side at the bar in a saloon, each with a shiny new black eye, having a beer together — that actually seems pretty spot-on, doesn't it?

There is something else Matsuoka was long-term right about, too, and this is where this story actually gets a little spooky. It was a famous speech, one that he gave in Geneva in 1931 as the League of Nations debated what to do about the Manchuria Incident.

"Humanity crucified Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago," he declared. "And today? Can any of you assure me that the so-called world opinion can make no mistake? We Japanese feel that we are now put on trial. Some of the people in Europe and America may wish even to crucify Japan in the 20th century."

Gentlemen, Japan stands ready to be crucified! But we do believe, and firmly believe, that in a very few years, world opinion will be changed and that we also shall be understood by the world as Jesus of

Sources

Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yosuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1880-1946, a book by David J. Lu published in 2002 by Lexington Books; "Yosuke Matsuoka: The Far-Western Roots of a World-Political Vision," an article by Masaharu Ano published in the Summer 1997 issue of Oregon Historical Quarterly; "Americans Rate Canada, Britain, France, Japan Most Favorably," an article by Megan Brenan published on news.gallup.com on March 14, 2022

his eyewitness account of Hiroshima after the bomb — maybe Khrushchev would have understood, and agreed with, Matsuoka's sentiment.

It is entirely possible, if not likely, that Japan's atomic sacrifice saved the world from nuclear holocaust 17 years later.

The argument goes like this: Hiroshima became a sacrificial lamb on that day and a few days later Nagasaki became another, giving the world a small taste of what nuclear holocaust might look like in the era of multi-megaton hydrogen bombs. After seeing that film footage and reading those eyewitness accounts, no one would ever be able to think of nuclear war in purely abstract terms again.

And that is a gift the whole world received in 1945, paid for in full with the blood of Japanese innocents. The gift they bequeathed us was a visceral demonstration of why such weapons must never be used again. And we may never know if we owe those innocents our own lives. But it seems likely, doesn't it?

So, maybe — just maybe — we would all be dead today and our beautiful planet a scarred and smoking cinder if it hadn't been for an incompetent drug smuggler on the old shanghaiing-era Portland waterfront taking a little Japanese boy into his household, 130 years ago.

Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. His book, Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon, was recently published by Ouragan House Publishers. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.

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Puzzle Solutions

Guess Who? Answer: Teri Hatcher

WORD SCRAMBLE Answer: Covers

SUDOKU grid with numbers 1-9 in a 9x9 grid.

WORD SEARCH grid with letters and words highlighted in orange.

CRYPTO FUN puzzle with symbols and letters, and answers: A. chapter B. synopsis C. theme D. setting

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