

Young Daisaku (4) The End of the War

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By 1945, the end of the war was very near, though the Japanese people did not know this. During the last days of the war, it seemed to Ikeda that the whole world was headed endlessly in an insane, destructive direction, faced as he was with the official call to fanatic patriotism and the absolute despair of the people around him.

Hope for the future was not an easy sentiment to maintain. Many of us are fortunate to have friends or role models at hand who encourage us to move through difficult circumstances, but even the well-intentioned in Ikeda's life were so caught up in their sufferings that they could barely keep their own hope kindled, much less help an idealistic teen.

This, perhaps, was why Ikeda spent so much time alone, reading. About those days, Ikeda writes: "I looked forward to the dawn of another day with the vague notion in mind: When the war ends, I'd have to study" (*My Recollections*, p. 39). It was in his books that he found the strength to maintain his ideals.

Because of the war, basic necessities were denied to civilians in order to support the military effort. The Ikedas, like most Japanese families, struggled every day to eat. Between the arduous conditions at work and the austere conditions at home, Daisaku's health deteriorated rapidly. He would often collapse and vomit blood. His condition was diagnosed as tuberculosis, a disease widespread in Japan during the war.

Despite his rapidly degenerating condition, he was unable to let up his daily routine and frequently worked with a fever higher than 102 degrees. Not only did his family depend upon his income, but the nation was so caught up in the wartime fervor that any attempt at rest or recuperation would be viewed as lazy at best, treasonous at worst.

Air raids over Tokyo were now almost a daily affair. One historian recounts that "the dreaded planes sought out not factories but people, and concentrated on fire-bombings of congested, inflammable cities in order to coerce Japan into surrendering.... Approximately 2,300,000 houses had gone up in smoke by the time it was all over, that is, about 20 percent of the habitations in all of Japan" (Mikiso Hane, *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey*, p. 326).

On April 15, Kamata — where Ikeda worked — was devastated in a saturation air raid. The building where Ikeda worked was destroyed.

At the beginning of the year, a doctor had told the family that Daisaku needed immediate treatment. The doctor also warned that even under the best circumstances Ikeda would most likely not live past 24. These air raids, however, destroyed any hope of treatment for Daisaku.

On May 24, the home where the Ikedas were staying sustained a direct hit. Ikeda recalls the whole family scurrying about, trying to save themselves. As the family was rushing toward shelter, Daisaku tried to grab something. He thought momentarily about saving his books, but decided instead to rescue a very large trunk, which he hoped had something of value to the family. Unfortunately, it contained only holiday decorations.

Losing his precious books was devastating, but being sad about a few books was a luxury when even basic necessities were scarce. He consoled himself by "re-reading" his books in his mind.

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