

Americans stand out in a Tokyo crowd

THE day of Emperor Hirohito's funeral was a cold, white, dreary day, and all of Tokyo was in mourning.

An eerie silence had settled over the Marnouchi section of the city as I raced out of Tokyo station and headed after the crowd of umbrellas down the avenue toward the Imperial Palace. Even the sound of footsteps seemed hushed by the gentle rain.

Huge national flags hung limply from poles lining the streets. Armed soldiers stalked around the barricades, and armored cars sat along the center of the avenue.

A mournful, 21 gun salute rocked through the air. The sidewalk trembled slightly as shot after shot boomed.

I thought about the controversial funeral, the controversial man, and I wondered how the Japanese would mourn for this turbulent figure. That was what I had come to Tokyo to see, but it's hard to find a story when you can't speak the language and you can't read the signs.

When the salute had finished, the tide of umbrellas immediately turned and bore down on me. I realized I'd missed the funeral procession I'd hoped to catch sight of, and I turned around to try to beat the crowd back to the train station.

"Maybe I can see the procession entering Shinjuku Gynen Garden (the park where the funeral was held)," I thought.

I jumped into a train car packed with groups of black-suited mourners, each toting paper bags of plastic umbrellas. When the train reached Shinjuku Gyoenmae Station, I followed the crowd out of the car, out of the station, around the bend, and past an endless line of luxury buses. Eventually, I ended up on a street corner by a wide intersection. It was 10:30 a.m.

I jostled my way to the edge of the crowd, cocked my camera, and tried to protect both my camera, my bag, and myself from the steady drizzle with my rather small umbrella.

Eventually a mini bike, followed by an empty, flag waving black car, passed by, turned the corner, and entered the park through a nearby side gate. I waited and waited, but nothing else seemed to be coming.

As I waited in the rain, I looked around and noticed the grim faces of elderly men, and stooped old ladies waiting patiently and silently in the bone-chilling cold beside me. I wondered if they still felt the passionate loyalty to the emperor they'd been raised to believe was a god, and I wished I knew enough Japanese to talk to them and learn what they

View from Japan

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were thinking.

Ever since the emperor's death, a bitter feud had been raging in the English language newspaper I received at home about the emperor's role in history, and the proper way to bury a ruler and member of the Shinto religion while still maintaining separation of church and state.

I remembered the history books and Japanese novels I'd read which had stressed the role of a joint shintoist and nationalist fervor during World War II, and I understood why people would be anxious to ensure that this separation remained distinct. I wondered if the old people around me still worshipped and respected this man who had renounced his divinity at the end of World War II, or if they resented the symbol of their country who lived as a reclusive, unattainable deity while they tried to survive on a meager diet of squash.

As I stood musing in the cold, silent rain, I began to wonder if anything would happen. I realized I'd missed the procession when I noticed the only people holding cocked cameras and wearing intent, searching facial expressions were the westerners dotted throughout the crowd. I concentrated my fractured Japanese on the people surrounding me and tried to figure out what everyone was now waiting for, and when this mysterious event would occur.

A security guard standing on the edge of the crowd was patiently answering questions, and I focused my attention on him. The only words I could understand were "juu san ji" (13:00), and eventually I realized nothing was supposed to happen in my immediate area until 1 p.m.

By this time I was cold, wet, and rather confused. I wandered forlornly away from my busy streetcorner, and searched among the tightly locked up storefronts for a warm, dry coffee shop.

I had just about abandoned my search and decided to head home when I heard a booming English voice to my right. I turned and noticed several Americans getting to know each other. I think it was then that I realized I wouldn't have to spend the rest of my day wandering

In Japan, the way you can identify Americans living outside of Tokyo is by how friendly they are to each other. Newly arrived Americans and Tokyo Americans ignore each other. They pass each other on the street without the slightest acknowledgement of their shared American identity. However, Americans living outside Tokyo are always somewhat surprised by a strange, non-Japanese face. We get so used to being stared at by the surrounding Japanese population, we can't help staring at each other when we meet on the street, in a store, or on a train.

The booming American voice turned out to belong to one of those people whose main purpose in life is to make strangers seem like friends. A tall English teacher, Fuller grabbed me by the shoulder and announced I was going to join them for lunch in the type of warm, dry place I'd been hoping to find.

We wandered away from the somber crowd with a new found spirit of companionship and adventure. By the time we'd finished lunch and had begun sharing our personal observations of Japan, I was more and more reluctant to venture into the cold, wet crowds again. One of my new American friends suggested we go up to his hotel where we could watch an English language version of the funeral. I rapidly agreed because I knew this was something I couldn't view from the street.

By the time the countless heads of government and other mourners had paid their last respects to Hirohito, we were engaged in a heated conversation about the treatment of foreigners in Japan, the cultural differences, and the surprising cultural similarities we'd all witnessed. By now I had given up all hope of seeing the rest of the procession, and was merely basking in the stimulating English conversation.

Suddenly, our host glanced up at the television.

"It's right around the corner!" he shouted, pointing to the simple black hearse and lines of respectful soldiers lined along the streets. "Let's run down and see if we can catch it!"

We fumbled with our coats and shoes, dug out our cameras and film, and hurried out the front door of the hotel.

I followed the others around the corner, down the street, and reached the street corner just in time to see ...

... the tired crowd break up, spread out from the empty street, and head for the trains.