

The Voice of FUKUSHIMA

A Cry from the Heart

Ground Zero 03: Home but Home no More

Yotsukura Diaries 3/11 and Beyond

Yogan Baum

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2 Back in Yotsukura

Now, where were we before election night? Before I learned to hate? Before, I was forced to understand things I would never have wanted to understand? Before I got chained to this keyboard, my ball, and chain, as well as my life vest? Before I felt compelled to cry out to you, wherever you may be, to try and learn from our plight? There is nothing to be gained from nuclear power production, believe me. There are short-term gains, and there is the long, hard slog after the lights are out. Forty, or fifty years of profits for a certain few and fifty thousand years of remorse for the rest of mankind. In a best-case scenario, that is, a scenario with no need for manuals detailing “meltdown” and other nasty stuff.

I was happy and safe in the garden Mariko had made for us here in the sleepy village of Yotsukura before March 11, 2011. That much, I remember very well. A series of unfortunate events made us run and hide ten thousand kilometers from our home, as I related in the previous two parts of this book serial. You can't hide forever, though. You can't run away from your own life, Mariko and I learned. Our children, after long and intense discussions, came to accept the truth in this simple observation. They went from “you gotta be crazy!” to “maybe you're right ...” and took us to another tearful gate. “We'll see you soon... take good care of yourselves, you, too ... and don't worry about us!”

With rather mixed feelings, we looked down upon Japan from the air as we approached Narita Airport seven weeks to the day after having left in such a hurry. Were we aware of doing something hard? Yes, we were. It is just that we had no choice. It was impossible to cut all ties to Japan and stay, however tempting that had seemed during those seven sunny weeks with our children, with my mother. How gorgeous that spring of 2011 was! We didn't know it at the time, but those were also the last weeks with my mother. She pleaded with me to stay, it is heartbreaking to remember, but mama, we could not stay. We had no way of making a living in the old country. After thirty years? We had the choice to starve slowly, risking our last chance to try and build a meager retirement fund, or jump back into the frying pan. We jumped – hoping it would not be too hot in the pan.

“Fasten your seatbelts, please...” The plane touched down as if nothing had happened. There were cherry trees near the runway, and some were in late bloom. “Welcome to Japan,” the signs said, and the immigration officials were just as polite and efficient as always. There were the usual crowds in the arrival lobby, and there was no smell of fear anywhere anymore. Seven weeks earlier, Mariko and I had been two lost souls among thousands trying to leave a zoo called “Narita Airport,” now we were quite ordinary, arriving passengers, two among thousands, again. Had we been dreaming? We lugged our suitcases, filled with food, through customs and out the doors of the terminal building to find the “Highway Bus” for Hitachi. That bus has been our standard means of getting to the airport and back for many years. In Hitachi, Mariko's father would be waiting for us. There are several buses departing from the same number 10 slot, and we saw a foreign husband / Japanese wife couple standing in line right there and struck up a little conversation. I was interested mainly in finding out if they would be on the same bus with us. When I mentioned going north, the husband reacted as if I had shown him a ghost or threatened him with a switchblade. That look on his face!

I was glad our bus wasn't late. Going back to where we had run from took a long time. It was a trip against all odds of staying awake. Eight hours of time lag and a sleepless eleven hours on an airplane makes for a peculiar state of mind. Drifting in and out of a haze, I heard people speak strange

languages, saw strange things, and felt just so very tired in body and soul. Mariko sat near me, but we didn't talk. There was nothing to say, really. The die had been cast, we were on our way back to Yotsukura, and that was it.

Arriving in Hitachi a little past schedule, we saw Grandpa standing there, ready for us. "Ah, a little late, aren't you?" He looked content to see us, smiling like a fat, Chinese Buddha, but as he is not much given to emotions, we just piled our heavy suitcases into his huge Volvo station wagon, and off we went. "How are things?" we wanted to know and were relieved that all was well. It was Golden Week, the week of holidays beginning on April 29th, a day to traditionally celebrate the emperor's birthday, and ending on May 5th with Children's Day. Really it is "Boy's Day", as girls have their day on March 3rd. Both days command their respective customs and decorations, but, that year we didn't see many of the colorful carp streamers that are hoisted to celebrate the family's male offspring. Those streamers are a pretty sight, especially seen against the backdrop of young spring leaves. The tireless upstream battle of the carps is thought to be a fitting image to show young boys what they have to expect from life. A lesson presented in pretty colors, very pedagogic. Something to aspire to – what boy would not want to rise to the challenge? It's also a countryside thing. The city has lost the invigorating spirit long ago. Little did we see fluttering in the wind as we were driven north. What struck me, how you suddenly notice things, was the great number of high voltage power lines running parallel to the road. Over hill and dale, they were strung, disappearing towards Tokyo. I knew where they came from, and I also knew that they had been entirely powerless for seven weeks already.

Arriving in Yoshima, we were glad to see Mariko's mother in good spirits and even a little bit recovered from the fear she had suffered over those last weeks. Iwaki had been a ghost town. Most everybody gone. Many shops closed – the open ones selling necessities in rationed quantities. Everybody has seen pictures of customers standing patiently in line after March 11th of 2011, I think? No supplies reached Iwaki for quite some time as truckers plainly refused to serve that hellhole. "The danger!" No water for weeks, except for public taps at certain designated places. Electricity, yes. Gasoline – limited. Fear – plenty. There had, of course, been constant aftershocks, and there had been an especially strong one on April 11th, as if to commemorate the first "eleven" after The Big One. It was a local quake, epicenter right below Iwaki, clocking in at magnitude M 6.6, American measurements, but M 7.0 as measured by the Japanese, and shook Iwaki badly. It killed three, caused several landslides and a general blackout. It reached an intensity of "shindo seven" on the Japanese "Intensity Scale" in one place, stronger than the ground shook during the March 11th quake with its epicenter far away, under the sea. It caused a temporary evacuation of Dai-ichi, too, but fortunately, no further damage was reported there. It showed that long-dormant faults had been activated in Iwaki (as well as in many other places) by The Big One of March 11, 2011, and gave scientists and emergency planners food for thought. Rick, who had just come back from Kyushu with Sanae and their daughter Qiana, told me how they had experienced the thing. It was late afternoon, 5:16 pm, and almost dark, as there was an electric storm raging. There we stood out in the rain, lightning flashing, and felt the ground shake beneath our feet... it made you want to raise your arms to heaven in a wordless "What else?" Well, we were lucky that quake was not nearer to Dai-ichi.

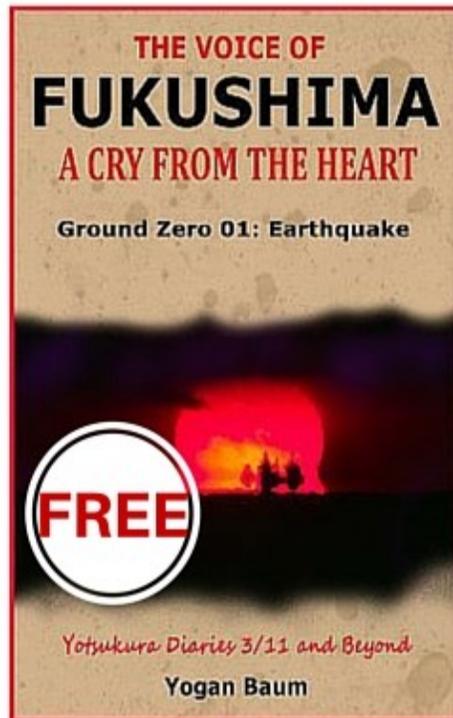
We had questioned Grandpa about the situation at Dai-ichi, of course, while we rode north so very comfortably, and what he said, and kept repeating, was, "another big quake and we're finished." This about summed it up well. Grandma was more emotional, but even she had retained her cool admirably in the face of those three exploded reactors that were much too close for comfort. "Maa... shoganai!" is what she said. These words were to obtain a mantra-like quality over the next months and years. "Well, there's nothing you can do about it." The Japanese don't like to reason why the earth shook, why the volcano erupted, or why the typhoon struck. They have found thousands of years ago that it is better to roll up your sleeves and go to work than to wallow in pain. Losses are frequently suffered in this

country of catastrophes, and nobody complains. I had seen tsunami debris piled up to be taken away only two days after the tsunami had devastated our coast, and that is how people react here. They go to work. The downside, to me, is how this attitude lets certain people get away with murder, figuratively speaking, of course. “Shoganai!” has a twin sister called “Shikataganai!” and these two dominated and keep dominating the discourse. Spilled milk. No use crying over it. We had to eat, another feast for the prodigal children, and then the grandparents wanted to hear about their far-away grandchildren. “How scared they must have been!” It had been Grandma’s main argument for us to flee Japan and is also a beautiful testimony of her grandmotherly love. “Go, so May and Leon won’t have to worry about their parents anymore.”

We had much to relate and did not come empty-handed. Apart from the usual little presents, we brought cash. Relatives and some of my mother’s friends had entrusted a considerable sum of money to us “to use at your own discretion.” We had told them we’d like to help Mariko’s parents mend their roof, and everybody thought that was a good idea. It was touching how generous everybody was. My family is not rich, but as I have experienced before, the not-so-well-off give freely where the rich want details. All the world helped Japan generously, and that is not forgotten here.

Other books by Yogan Baum

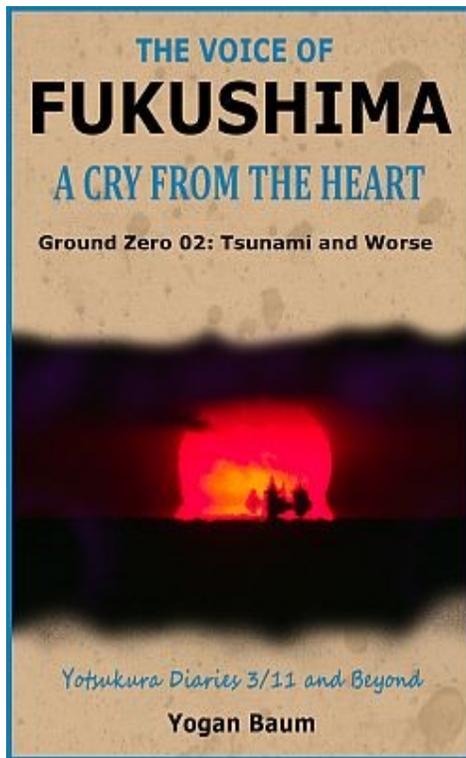
[The Voice of FUKUSHIMA](#)
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In Part 1 of ebook serial “The Voice of FUKUSHIMA: A Cry From the Heart” Yogan Baum, longtime resident of [Yotsukura](#), a fishing village near Fukushima, relates how he experienced the M 9.0 [Tohoku megaquake](#) of 3/11/2011.

Awed by the intensity of the experience, he is unaware of its consequences. This book weaves a tapestry entwining both raw terror and some of the fruits of years of reflection.

[The Voice of FUKUSHIMA](#)
[A Cry from the Heart](#)
[Ground Zero 02: Tsunami and Worse](#)



Unaware that the M 9.0 megaquake of March 11, 2011 was just the beginning of it all, Yogan Baum narrowly escapes the ensuing tsunami. Wandering around his little village in search of his wife, he slowly realizes the really bad news is still to come.

Early next morning the north-flying Chinooks overhead tell their own story. By 9:00 in the morning reunited to his wife, the flight from Fukushima is on. Japan is on the brink, and the whole world is watching Fukushima Dai-ichi.

An odyssey of three days on the road which leads to various insights but no conclusion is salvaged by an angry voice. And soon two out of two hundred on flight ANA 1516 see the overcrowded but otherwise desolate Fukushima Airport fall back below them like the smoldering deck of a doomed aircraft carrier while snacks are already being served ...

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