

Japan's New Problem

Labor Supply Is Drying Up

(Fifth of Six Parts)

In a great tangle of colored streamers, the Osaka-Bepu excursion liner drew away from the wharf at Kobe. Ashore, men in Western dress and women in kimonos waved frantically. Behind them, music began to blare from loudspeakers on the roof of the terminal building.

"It can't be," said Ed McNally.

But it was: "Should Auld acquaintance be forgot . . ."

When Clay fought Liston we were in Osaka, out of pocket-radio range of the U.S. armed forces' transmitter in Tokyo. The fight took place at about noon, local time. Afternoon editions of the English-language newspapers from Tokyo failed to carry the result. Edo-san was going frantic. He telephoned the front desk of the hotel and asked for a bellboy.

The boy arrived and looked up inquiringly, "Yes, sir?"

"Can you speak English?" asked Edo-san.

"Hi-hi," grinned the boy.

"Now listen carefully," said Edo-san, enunciating each word as if he were reading from McGuffey's. "Do you know who won the fight?"

"Cray."

"It's impossible!" said Edo-san.

"Hi-hi," agreed the boy.

"Clay won the fight?"

The bellboy began to look worried. He asked softly, "No?"

Edo-san closed the door and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, the kid can't speak English," he said.

The tourist's life in Japan is filled with misunderstandings, some hilarious, some serious. But he can always rely on the Japanese's innate sense of courtesy. Living shoulder-to-shoulder in a country the size of Newfoundland, they have developed an intricate code of social behavior. Much of it might seem artificial to the average North American but its general effect is attractive. It creates an impression of good nature.

When we were leaving, Edo-san suddenly said, "You know—in the whole three weeks we haven't heard one Japanese raise his voice."

So much has been written about overpopulation that it comes as a shock to discover that some Japanese today are worried about underpopulation.

Next to the Netherlands and Belgium, Japan has the highest population density in the world: 264 people per square kilometer compared with two people per square kilometer in Canada. Its population has increased from 55,

000,000 in 1920 to about 96,000,000 today.

The biggest "surge" in births occurred between 1947 and 1949. Today the birth rate, reduced by an official program of birth control and about 1,000,000 legal abortions a year, is less than half the 1948 rate.

The government's Institute of Population Problems estimates that the population will increase slowly to a peak of 113,000,000 in 1995 before starting to decrease.

In recent years industry has reaped the benefits of the postwar baby boom. Millions of teenagers have finished their compulsory nine years of schooling and moved directly into factories producing cameras, transistor radios, motorcycles, cars, textiles and other important exports.

Despite this abundant flow of new workers, labor is in short supply in Japan today. Smaller factories in particular are having trouble finding and keeping young workers. The owner of a small tool plant in suburban Tokyo told me that he now makes several recruiting trips into rural areas every year to locate new hands.

Service industries have felt the squeeze. Said the German-born manager of the new Tokyo Hilton, "It's worse than at home. The main problem of every hotelman in the city is finding maids and waiters."

In the next few years the number of youngsters entering the labor force will start to decline. Some Japanese economists are concerned about the effect that this will have on productivity and wages. Industrialists are beginning to see disadvantages in population control.

The drop in the birth rate and improved medical services are producing a much "older" population in Japan. At the same time, the scarcity of living accommodation in cities has helped to break up the traditional grandparent-parent-children family unit. The cost of such social services as day nurseries and homes for the aged is rising rapidly.

Despite this, few authorities seriously question the necessity of limiting population in a small nation with strictly limited emigration opportunities.

At first glance, Japan seems to defy the normal rules of economics. Prices are high. Wages appear to be low. But the gap narrows on closer examination.

Basic wages may be as low as \$30 a month for a 15-year-old girl working on an assembly line. But these are supplemented by a wide

range of fringe benefits provided at little or no cost—accommodation, meals, medical care and recreation. Large companies sponsor elaborate sports and entertainment programs, including subsidized vacations and weekend group excursions to resorts and historic sites. Separated from other countries by distance and currency restrictions — now lifted — the Japanese are enthusiastic domestic tourists. Highways carry a constant stream of excursion buses filled with groups from factories, offices, schools and various rural organizations.

A widespread bonus system provides every worker with an additional two to six months' pay every year, depending on the prosperity of the company.

According to a recent government white paper, the average worker earned \$520 in 1963, almost equal to the 1961 per capita income in Italy.

Inflation eats up some of this increase. Prices rose by almost eight per cent last year. Rents are high. A made-to-measure suit of Japanese cloth sells for about 80 per cent of what it would cost in Canada. Food is relatively cheap unless you want to eat Western style. Beef hamburger, for instance, might cost almost twice its Canadian price.

Still, the symbols of prosperity are evident. A majority of people own television sets. Tokyo streets are filled with new cars, more and more of them privately owned. Everyone seems to own a good camera. People appear to be at least as well-dressed as they are in Canada.

Effects of the gap between wages and prices are hidden by this surface prosperity. But a close look at Japanese life reveals a number of shortcomings. Housing is the obvious problem.

Admitted a Tokyo newspaper: "While we take pleasure in believing that Japan is approaching a western European standard of living, we are faced with the fact that a large number of people are living in buildings that would not be permitted to be used for human habitation in Western countries."

The housing shortage is so acute that most factories, even small ones, have to erect on-site living quarters. Ramshackle dwellings are crammed between warehouses and foundries.

At first it is difficult to tell why a factory district in Tokyo looks different. Then you notice the children and later, the dingy houses. There are also barracks for single men and for husbands whose

homes are several hours away by train. These men will leave for home after work Saturday and return to the factory Sunday night.

According to the government white paper, only 11 per cent of the nation has plumbing and sewage facilities. Streets in many cities are badly maintained. Even in Tokyo, sidewalks are rare. Social welfare services are inadequate by Western standards.

There are many shortcomings to Western eyes. Asian eyes, on the other hand, see an incredibly advanced and booming Asian nation.

He was a member of Soka Gakkai, one of 10,000,000 Japanese who belong to the fastest-growing religious sect in Japan. Soka Gakkai is an evangelistic form of Buddhism. One of the main duties of a believer is to make converts and he was trying, hard, against insurmountable odds.

He explained that the main object of worship was a scroll containing not only the writing but the very presence of Nichiren, a buddha or god-like being who lived in Japan about 700 years ago.

"That's difficult to accept," I said.

"What do you worship?" he asked.

"Well, first of all, the priest takes a piece of bread . . ."

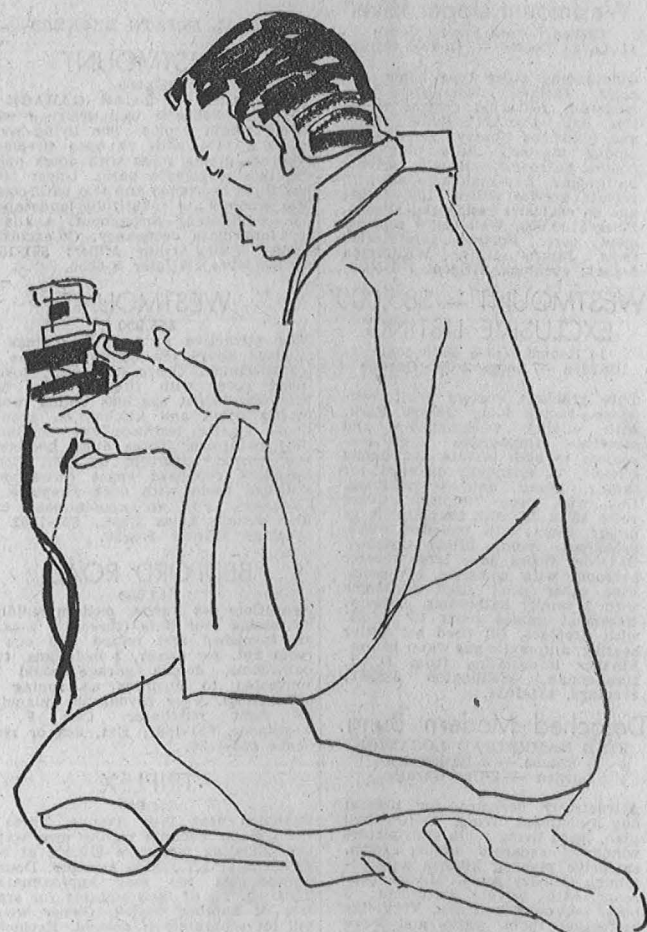
It was his turn to look sympathetic.

In the centre of Tokyo is the Imperial Palace. In the centre of the Palace is the Emperor. On New Year's Day in 1946, he told his subjects that he was human, not divine. Some observers claim that the Japanese are still searching for a substitute, for the right religion, for the right political system, for their right place in the world.

Symptom:

At the end of last year, Japanese police authorities estimated that their 130,000 policemen were pitted against 180,000 members of organized criminal gangs. They said that there were 5,211 gangs in Japan. One gang recently chartered an airliner to fly 50 toughs from Tokyo to assist "brothers" in Kumamoto. The adult gangs, according to a Tokyo newspaper, are fed by "expanding armies of young hoodlums." The editorial writer wondered why teenagers turn to crime "at a time when the demand for workers is increasing beyond the annual supply."

His own theory: "One possible clue may be seen in the organized nature of the criminal world. The drifting youth of today may find in the gangs much that they have hungered for—not just adventure but discipline."



SKETCHES BY McNALLY



Wooden shoes are practical on a rainy Tokyo day.

