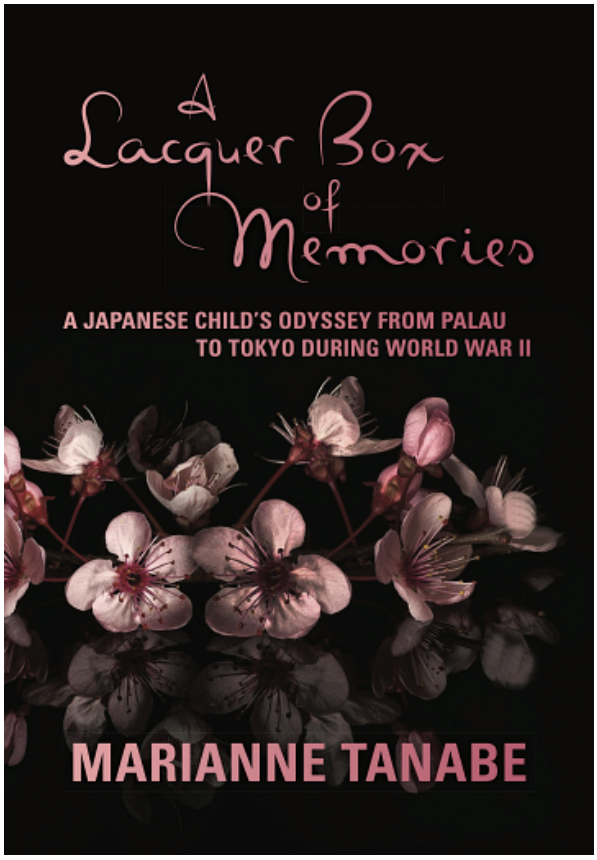


A Japanese child living in Palau during World War II begins the odyssey of escape as the war intensifies. The human experience unabashedly unfolds.

A Lacquer Box of Memories: A Japanese Child's Odyssey from Palau to Tokyo during World War II

By Marianne Tanabe

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A Lacquer Box of Memories

A JAPANESE CHILD'S ODYSSEY FROM PALAU TO TOKYO DURING WORLD WAR II



MARIANNE TANABE

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Leaving Manila

The ship sailed boldly with a convoy. It sailed with cautious ironclad determination into the South China Sea to follow its course to Taiwan. The course would take them through the Luzon Strait, the strait that contained the perilous Bashi Channel.

The night carefully opened the drapes of morning with the shimmer of dawn. During the day, as much as it was feasible, the ship hugged the coastline of islands in the strait to reduce the risk of Allied detection. At night, there was a total blackout as the ship's lights were turned off to further decrease the risk of Allied detection. Everything was done to reduce the risk of being torpedoed or bombed. Many on board the ship became miserably seasick on this voyage. It felt as if the arduous journey would never come to an end.

Looking at the night horizon through a porthole, Momo saw the shimmering waves, which were illuminated by moonlight. The ship rode the waves up and down, steadily heaving its way forward. At

times, the ship seemed to sway sideways. Amid this repeated rocking, there were occasions of unexpected rough waves that rocked the ship. These ominous waves seemed to willfully mock the ship as if it were teasing the confidence out of a toy ship. Distant loud sounds of explosions could occasionally be heard. Momo could not sleep.

Then right before dawn while still in the abyss night, Momo heard a commotion, then subsequent orders to leave the ship. They were below deck and needed to climb the long narrow stairs to get up to the deck. She and her siblings got in line, and it seemed as though the line itself pushed them forward with a mysterious force. Loud voices emanated through the growing chaos and instructed them to move quickly. Momo was already climbing the stairs with her siblings and was halfway up the stairs when she heard the distinct familiar voice of her mother yell, "*Hayaku* [hurry], *hayaku* [hurry]!" The tone in her mother's resolute voice was instructing the children to hurry up and focus on escaping. Momo turned her head to look for her. In turning her head, she spotted her mother off to the side of the rushing stream of

people headed towards the stairs. Her mother was still below deck, and she was not in line. Momo tried to go back towards her mother but was pushed forward by the people behind her. Her mother was carrying Hiro and Eri. On her head, she had placed a khaki-colored blanket that had been given to evacuees. Right by her feet, there was the urn, wrapped in a white cloth, of beloved Masa. In her mother's eyes, the urn was still her child, but in a different form.

Momo gazed at her mother for what seemed like an eternity. She was transfixed by her countenance, especially the expression in her eyes. It was the eyes that lovingly guarded and tracked her children as they were making their way towards safety. It was the eyes that were prepared to say a final goodbye and meet death with the two children she was carrying. It was the loving eyes of a mother, the prayerful eyes which emanated the fusion of pure intense love, sadness, hope, grace, beauty, and apprehension all at once. It was the emanation of an abiding infinite love, reflected in her mother's eyes, which was forever seared into

Momo's heart. It was an image that she would never forget.

After what seemed like a long climb, Momo and her siblings emerged onto deck. From the deck, a rope ladder that seemed to sway became the narrow means to the evacuation vessel below. The very soft and faint light on the horizon belied the still black waves rhythmically hurling itself back and forth. The early hints of dawn betrayed that the heavy remnants of the black abyss of night were still present. Momo and her siblings were instructed to climb down the ladder one by one to the smaller vessel below. The rope ladder not only swung but was wet. Soldiers on the vessel below shouted firm instructions to quickly descend, and when they were on the last rung, they were ordered to jump into the vessel. It was the first time Momo sensed the true precariousness and the piercing urgency of the moment. Uncertainty and anxiety filled the air. Momo and her siblings obeyed the instructions. Momo focused on climbing down the ladder, and when she was on the last rung, she jumped. She was caught by the soldier in the vessel. She was now on the small vessel with her

siblings. Her mother was not with them. The vessel sailed away from the ship.

Leaving Babuyan Island on a Speedboat

The family had been living under the shaded area not far from the shore and sleeping on the ground. About a month into living on Babuyan, they were suddenly awakened late at night by two soldiers. They were instructed to immediately board a speedboat waiting at shore. They would be heading for Taiwan. Momo's mother quickly gathered her family by awakening those who were still asleep. Everyone was grateful, elated, and relieved. The time had finally arrived for them to continue their evacuation journey that started in Palau. As they possessed nothing, there was nothing to pack. Life was distilled to its essence. All that was needed was hope, faith, love, and dreams, which were already packed in their hearts. They had all they needed. They then headed in the dark toward the boat waiting for them at the shore. They were the only evacuees to board this boat. They wondered if other families who were also stranded would be coming later.

Momo and her family were packed tightly into the boat, squeezed into valuable space. The speedboat, which was primarily open, headed for the vast black ocean ahead in the darkness of night. It sharply cut through the black water and created its own waves. Under the sliver of moon, the shadow of Babuyan Island waned in distance. It turned into a thin line, and then this line was completely swallowed by the ocean. The shadow had now become a distant memory.

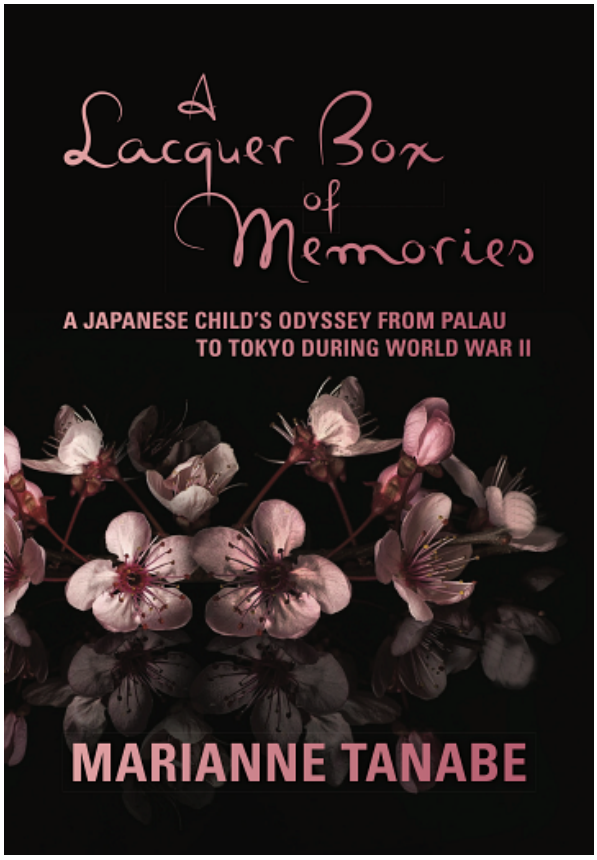
The speedboat would be going through the feared and treacherous Bashi Channel in the Luzon Strait. It was well known to the evacuee families that passing through the Bashi Channel was extremely dangerous. It was perilous at best, and at worst, deadly. There was the never-ending threat of Allied torpedoes and bombings for those traversing the Bashi Channel. It was a critical maritime corridor for transportation. The Bashi Channel was commonly known to evacuee families by the earned moniker, the Devil's Channel.

On the boat that night, Momo saw Japanese soldiers up close. They appeared exhausted. They

were dressed in their khaki uniforms with caps bearing a star, the imperial national army insignia. The soldiers had their backpacks with them. They were very quiet with expressionless faces. One soldier who was close to her, however, appeared contemplative with a forlorn longing in his eyes. He proceeded to look at Momo. He then identified himself by saying "*Ojoosan,* (polite and honorific way of addressing a young lady), when you one day safely return to mainland Japan—I am *Hayashi heicho* (lance corporal) from *Gunma-ken* (Gunma prefecture in Japan)." As if to underscore what he had just said, he proceeded to identify himself two more times. He said this a total of three times so that a mere child would long remember that moment. The contemplative soldier had introduced himself in a way that suggested that he sensed he would never see his beloved home, family, or friends again. He sensed that he was headed for a time and a place where everything that meant so much to him would cease to exist, or rather, he would cease to exist. There was an earnest plea in the way he introduced himself. The humble entreaty was for Momo to long remember that he

was here—in this moment, at this time, and on this boat. Unbeknownst to the soldier, he had inadvertently placed a burden on Momo's heart. The implied plea was that one day, when she safety reached Japan, she would relate to all the people he loved dearly back home in *Gunma-ken* that they were here together, packed on this boat, on this night, and in this moment. His gentle and soft voice resonated with this earnest implied plea. He was not just a dispensable person but a person with life and everything that life endows. Momo glanced at all the soldiers' countenances lit by the moonlight, and she noticed how strikingly young they were. Their youthful countenances emanated all the potential, the dreams, and the aspirations, which were put on hold for war. These young men's envisioned hopes of a long and full life ahead were now put on hold for service to their country. A thought came to rest on Momo's mind. If one day in the future she were to get married and have children, she would not want sons who would have to go war. She would want daughters who would be spared from conscription to the battlefront.

The speed boat raced against time and danger as it crossed the Bashi Channel. The waves were rough. The night was like a black shroud. The boat sped for Takao (Kaohsiung) on the southwestern coast of Taiwan. As the boat sliced through the waters and continued its course, the engine roared, unrestrained. It sped approximately 300 miles north, crossing into the dreaded Bashi Channel. The anticipation of dread made the journey through the Channel seem especially long. As they passed through the Channel, everyone was quiet and still, lifting silent prayerful wishes for continued safety. The engine continued to roar, mightily. Then at the earliest hint of a breaking dawn, the first sight of Taiwan was seen on the horizon. Taiwan was within reach. They had safely crossed the Bashi Channel. The undercurrent of the tangled emotions of apprehension, anticipation, hope, and prayer was transformed into the collective sentiment of immense relief, joy, and overflowing gratitude. The boat safely ported in Takao, and the family was relieved and exceedingly grateful for the safe passage.



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