



GIs (above) introducing Japanese girls to jive, think they are dancing with geishas, but the traditional entertainers (below) have all but disappeared.



The Geisha Girl, GI Version

She is not what Joe thinks she is,
for there are few real geishas left.

By LINDESAY PARROTT

TOKYO (By Wireless).

WE took off our shoes as we came in out of the cold, rainy night, and a diminutive maid led us down a maze of passages into a large mat-strewn hall. We squatted cross-legged on cushions behind tables which, standing two feet off the floor, were studded with bowls of raw fish, soya sauce, horse-radish and other delicacies of this land of chopsticks. Then a curtain was swept back from before a stage at one end of the room and there they were—Japan's traditional geisha girls, painted, doll-like, with their high upswept coiffure, looking like a human flower bed in their brick silk kimonos.

For an hour they danced the old dances of Japan, sang and played their long-necked samisens—those three-string banjos which are the geishas' special instrument. Then they came down from the stage—twenty-five or more of them—knelt across the tables from us, two geishas to each man, rotating constantly. With elaborate gestures they poured us tea or sake, themselves sipping from the same cups but only when we asked them to. Giggling, they even pushed steaming-hot sukiyaki made of meat, onions and bamboo shoots, into our mouths when they learned how clumsy-fingered most of us were with the two long wooden slivers which serve as knife and fork in the Orient. Later, when the meal was over, they danced again to music of drum and samisen—this time folk dances performed not on the stage but in the open area in the center of the horseshoe table arrangement.

Then, at 11 P. M. or thereabout, it was over. And it really was over, too. These geishas keep union hours, and when the clock strikes they're through. There isn't any question of going on to a night club or looking at etchings.

IT was probably one of the most elaborate geisha parties yet given in Japan since the wartime "ban on pleasure" law, put in effect on March 5, 1943, withdrew the licenses of all professional entertainers and spelled the end for geishas until the Allied armies came.

It was given for a group of Americans traveling through the undevastated regions of central Honshu, and the principal impresario was the local chief of police. It is doubtful if Tokyo could duplicate the party today, for the geisha has barely begun to trickle back to her traditional Sinbashi quarter from her wartime factory job or her place of refuge from American fire bombs. The Tokyo Metropolitan Police Board, which licensed the geishas, collected taxes from them and kept them under pretty constant supervision, says there are only 1,500 properly registered geishas in the capital today of the more than 10,000 who were here before the war, and it is somewhat of a question whether the geisha organization on a large scale ever will come back again.

This, of course, is contrary to the evidence of every GI who has spent a few days in Tokyo, for he is writing home en-

thusiastically about geishas he has seen—and he has seen thousands of them. That little creature who crouches at his side as he eats his fried shrimp and sweet-potato chips in a Tokyo restaurant, bows and smiles as he teaches her a few words of English and later may attempt with him the intricacies of American rug-cutting to music from the wheezy gramophone, isn't a geisha at all. She is at best a waitress or what used to be known as a "cafe girl," or a girl just out of war work, dressed up in borrowed finery. At worst she may be a member of the world's oldest profession—which the geisha emphatically is not supposed to be.

THE GI's little girl wouldn't know what to do with a samisen if you put one in her hands. Her idea of pouring tea is to get the stuff out of the pot and into the cup—which is probably all right with a thirsty soldier but isn't the idea at all in Japan. A proper tea ceremony takes two to three hours and has a religious origin. She has probably heard of flower arrangement, but she has certainly never taken the weeks and weeks of lessons it requires to learn even the basis of that Japanese art.

She is just another little girl like little girls all over the world—some nice, some nicer, some not nice at all—who have found the American soldier a good and also a profitable companion. All she has in common with the real geisha is that she too wears a kimono.

The geisha already was under severe competition as an entertainer, and from many sources, even before the war and if modern tastes prevail under the stimulus of the American occupation it is probable that she never again will reach her former glory.

The geisha at her best, as Lafcadio Hearn knew her and as "Madame Butterfly" represents her, was a highly skilled combination of entertainer, hostess, companion and conversationalist. Her tradition dates back to the "Obime girls," strolling players of the Nara period in the eighth century. She has been under Government supervision since 1689, when the first orders were issued regulating the conduct of "Odoriko girls," as geishas were then called.

SHE has been a member of some sort of guild or professional association since the first "Kenban" or general office for geishas was established in the eighteenth century. She had her origin undoubtedly in the seclusion of women in Japan. Wives and young girls under the Japanese family system stayed at home and did not venture into general male company. It was the geisha who took their places and the geisha's importance has been decreasing as the westernization of Japanese women and their emancipation from the earlier harem-like system increased.

She entered the profession usually in her teens, ordinarily from a poor family. She paid a large fee—which came out of her later earnings—to the skilled geisha who undertook to teach her the required arts of dress, (Continued on Page 47)

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make-up, conversation, music and so forth. Her training was received in a house with other geishas or geisha students. When she became successful she earned large fees and might set up on her own, perhaps with her own troupe of assistants. Aisaburo Abiyama, who has written a book about geishas, estimates that the average pre-war monthly income of first-class practitioners of their art in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto was 500 to 1,000 yen, commonly given by regular patrons. The wage of a fairly skilled working girl in a factory in those days was about 50 yen yearly. Some geishas of course earned less, few much more. And the geisha girl did not even have to be young and pretty. The author mentions geishas 50, 60, even 70, years old, their talents and training offsetting their lack of youth.

SUCH geishas, of course, were outstanding figures and beyond challenge, but the ordinary girl, catering to patrons of lesser means, was beginning to face difficulties even before the "China Incident" launched Japan on the path of war. In the first place she had lost her exclusive status as an entertainer to such innovations from abroad as the moving picture house and the dance hall.

Both Tokyo and Yokohama had half a dozen elaborate dance palaces with jazz orchestras where taxi-dancers in modern clothes

attracted some young men. Bars and cafes also were opening up all over Japan in pre-war days, and "cafe girls" without an elaborate, expensive and difficult training found it easy enough to make a living.

Then came the war and the "pleasure ban" putting an end to the whole centuries-old system.

The Metropolitan Police Board does not hazard a guess on what scale that system ever can be restored, but has interesting figures on what happened to the geishas when their licenses were revoked. Forty per cent went to work in factories—their delicate hands made them valuable in such work as building small radios and performing precision operations in aircraft construction. Thirty per cent of them, in the phrase of the police, "returned to their native places" and passed beyond the ken of the board. From these two classes a few are now returning to the capital, trying to find out whether there will be a renewed demand for their talents. Thirty per cent "got married or simply did nothing"—possibly carrying on quietly as entertainers without license.

ALL first-class restaurants and amusement centers closed, as did the "Machiai" or waiting houses where girls received calls as entertainers, houses where girls lived and got their training, tea houses and "cages à la Japonaise."

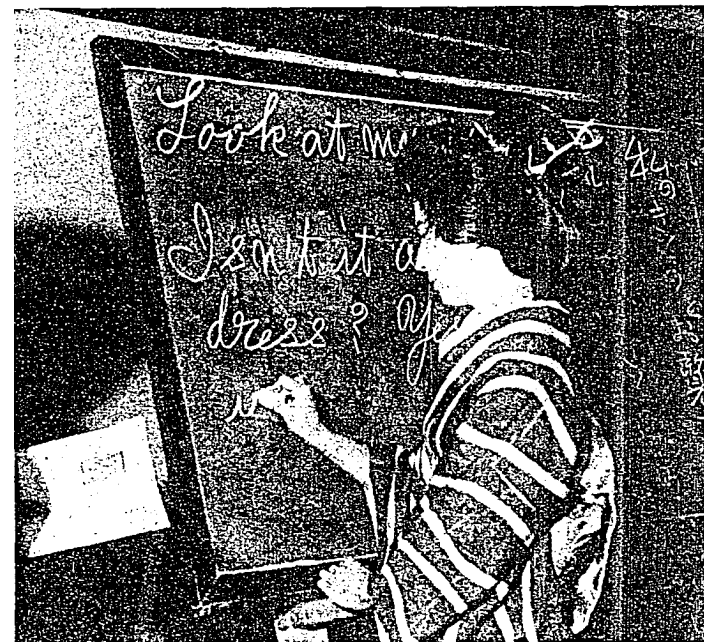
What geishas remained were in a purely unofficial status. Long before the Americans came here and made the matter one for the military police there was warm discussion in Japan concerning the morals of geishas. However, geishas could lose their licenses in case of complaints, and the geisha central exchanges insisted as well as they could that the girls play the part of public entertainers only.

THESE exchanges performed a major service for the geisha. Tokyo's was a large, modern, ornate building off the Ginza. Here were registered most of Tokyo's entertainers, and it was to the exchange that you put in a telephone call if you wanted to give a geisha party.

Not all geishas, of course, belonged to this or similar exchanges in other cities. At the top of the professional ladder, for instance, were the "jimae" class of geishas. Though under police license like the others, they kept and sometimes owned their own houses and felt it unnecessary to accept outside engagements through exchanges.

Second came the independent geisha or "tanagari," who paid all her own expenses and bought her own clothes. She may or may not have operated through the central exchange. She lived in a geisha house.

Lesser orders of geishas included the "wake," who bought her



A geisha girl learns to write English.

own clothes, boarded and lodged at a geisha house and was "booked" by a manager—probably also a geisha. And on the lowest rung of the flowered ladder of geishadom stood the "marakugakae," who simply worked for an employer and turned over all earnings against an initial fee for training or loans. These geishas were mostly beginners.

Some of the geishas in the old days married their wealthy admirers; most of them ultimately retired to their native villages with a hard-earned competence.

Few ended in the gutter. Like other women in a profession that offered considerable temptation, they sometimes went wrong, but more often lived by the rules of hard common sense, earned what they could and went home with a dowry to marry a suitable male.

It may be all over now, but—at least, according to those who knew their Japan before the war—that is what the geisha was and, perhaps, may be again. She certainly is not that girl over there to whom GI's are teaching jive in an off-limits cafe.