

People and Places

Walking through the Shrines and Gardens An Unforgettable Experience

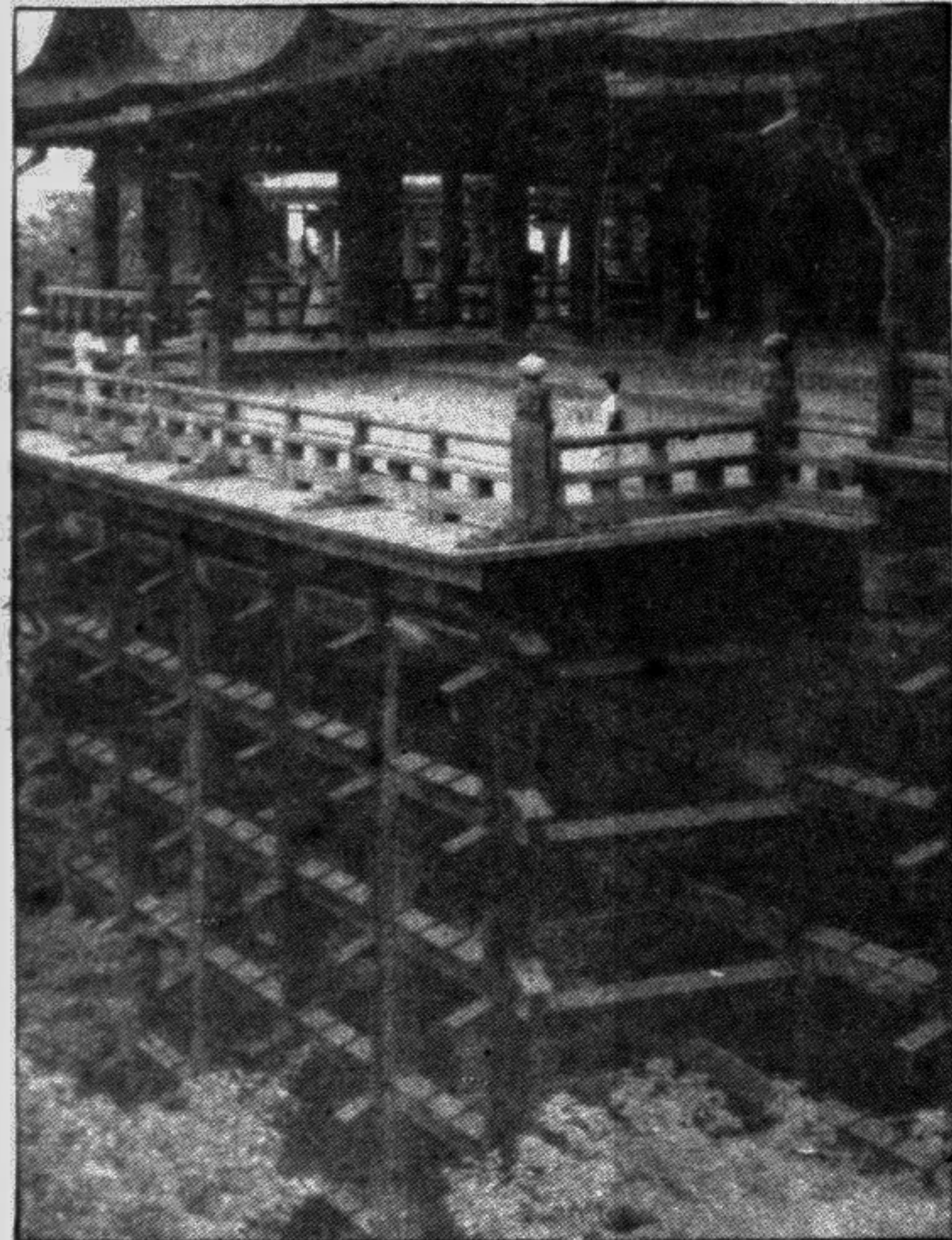
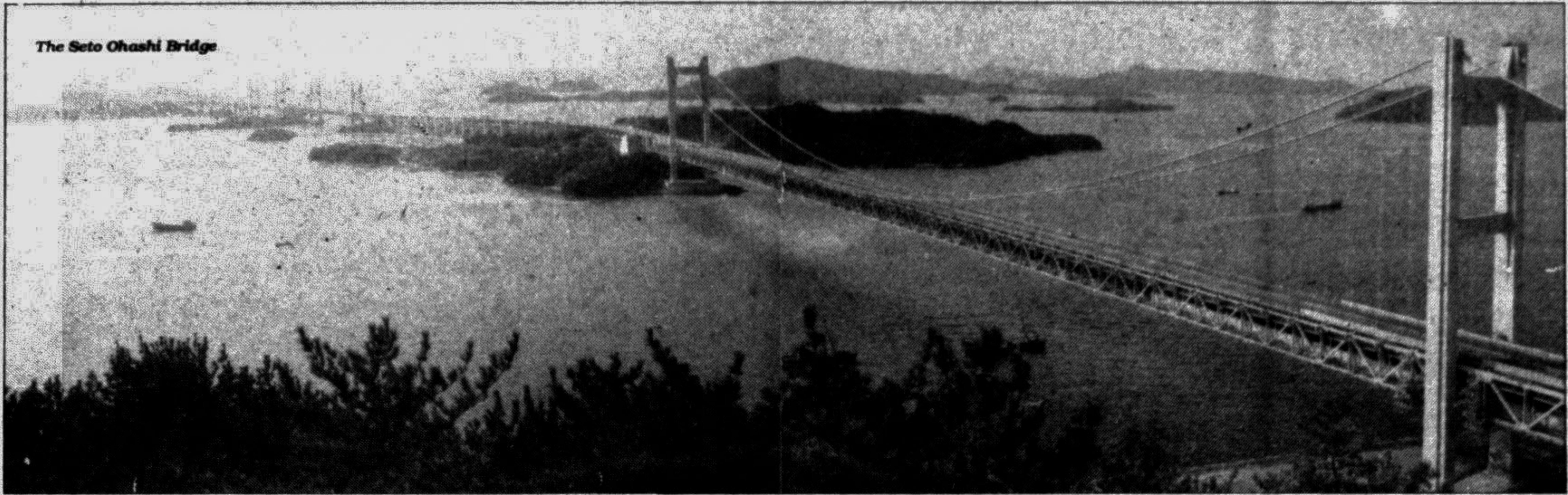
by NANCY WONG who recently visited Japan

The language barrier creates uncertainties. But a visitor faces other problems, somewhat unexpected in the land of high technology. There are paradoxes and contradictions. However, the ever helpful Japanese hosts do their best in making you feel welcome.

FOR the adventurous traveller who prefers to venture on his own without being herded around as part of a flock, travel in Japan can be both a dream or a nightmare; depending on lady luck. Wandering around on your own down the winding alleys of the old city of Kyoto, pausing to examine the delicate handicrafts of the locale or sitting on a park bench to savour the fresh spring air at leisure without having to keep an eye on your watch (in case you miss the bus); has a unique charm all its own. And if you get lost in a strange city, you are assured of every possible help from passersby — for the Japanese are inordinately hospitable in the sense they will go out of their way to help tourists.

To cite a personal experience, I had to make my way back to the hotel at the end of a temple tour as the bus did not make any drops to our hotel since it was quite a distance from town. Thus, relying on the guide's information, I walked a short distance to the Kyoto Handicrafts Centre from where a minibus was supposed to drop tourists off at various hotels at hourly intervals. After looking at the different kinds of handcraft, I made my way to the minibus parked besides the Centre and was stepping into it when I was stopped by a rather agitated looking driver. I told him where I wanted to go (in English) and he replied in rapid-fire Japanese and this attempt at a bi-lingual conversation carried on for a few minutes — much to the amusement of the onlookers in the bus. Puzzled, as there was ample room in the minibus, I showed him a carrying bag which had the name of the hotel where we were staying — Prince Hotel.

The Seto Ohashi Bridge



Sannenzaka: The main hall of Kiyomizu-dera

Whereupon, he took my hand and led me back to the building and got a receptionist (who spoke some English) to convey to me that a limousine would bring me back to the hotel. To this day, I haven't figured out why such preferential treatment was accorded to me — was it because I was on my own or that the hotel was too far from the town centre for the minibus to go? But it was a real relief to be back at the hotel and to be greeted with a warm smile by one of the pretty Japanese girls: "Welcome home". While this small incident reveals the helpful attitude of the Japanese towards visitors, it also shows the uncertainty the latter faces on account of the

language barrier. One is never quite sure whether one is understood — even in major international hotels as most Japanese hardly speak any language other than their own. This explains why special agencies have been established just to handle the arrivals and departures of "foreign guests". Our introduction to an "automated" society was quick and a little shattering when we saw not a glimpse of porter service upon landing in Osaka late at night, after a long flight. We retrieved our luggage (bursting with warm suits, sweaters and other assorted woolsens) from the carousel and chucked them on to the trolley. Fortunately, our host, the organizers of the seminar we

were scheduled to attend in Okayama, had arranged for a Japanese speaking American and a young Japanese student volunteer to meet us — a group of journalists from the United States, Europe and Asia. To all of us gathered at that spot that night at Osaka airport, they were a godsend, for none of us could speak a word of Japanese apart from the normal words of greeting and "thank you". We could relax — or so we thought! Little did we envisage the ordeal that laid ahead.

Our young guides (American male and Japanese girl) informed us we had to go to the railway station to take a two-hour ride by bullet train to our destination. Meanwhile, some of us were feeling rather insecure as we had no Japanese currency, so a Nepalese journalist and I climbed up a steep flight of stairs (there was no escalator) to a bank which had neon lights advertising their services, but it was closed! Mission unaccomplished, we decided we just had to depend on the generosity of our hosts and hoped that a situation would not arise whereby we may need to ask for cash for unexpected expenses. We actually thought we might need some change to avail ourselves of porter service. What wishful thinking this turned out to be!

Our group (about twenty) piled into limousine taxis which

drove us swiftly to the Railway Station — an ultra modern, spick and span, brightly lit edifice. Upon arrival, we looked around for trolleys as we all had hand luggage apart from the usual suitcases, but there were none in sight — nor any glimpse of a porter. Someone in the group innocently asked, "Where are the porters?" The young American gamely replied, "Me!" Then we saw a steep flight of stairs and all our hearts sank — it dawned upon us that we had to drag our heavy suitcases up all the way (192 — as one female journalist subsequently recounted). As most in the group were editors of newspapers and senior TV reporters, they were past their athletic phase of life — and the night was no longer young.

We were astonished that for such an ultra modern and huge railway station with no porter service available, there was such a glaring absence of lifts for luggage. After all, Osaka is the second largest city in industrialized Japan where long distance commuting and inter-city travel is a daily occurrence. Comparing notes with other arrivals who took the same route, a young Bangladeshi student confessed how his wife nearly cried when she saw the steep flight of stairs and realised that they had to drag their luggage all the way up to the platform.

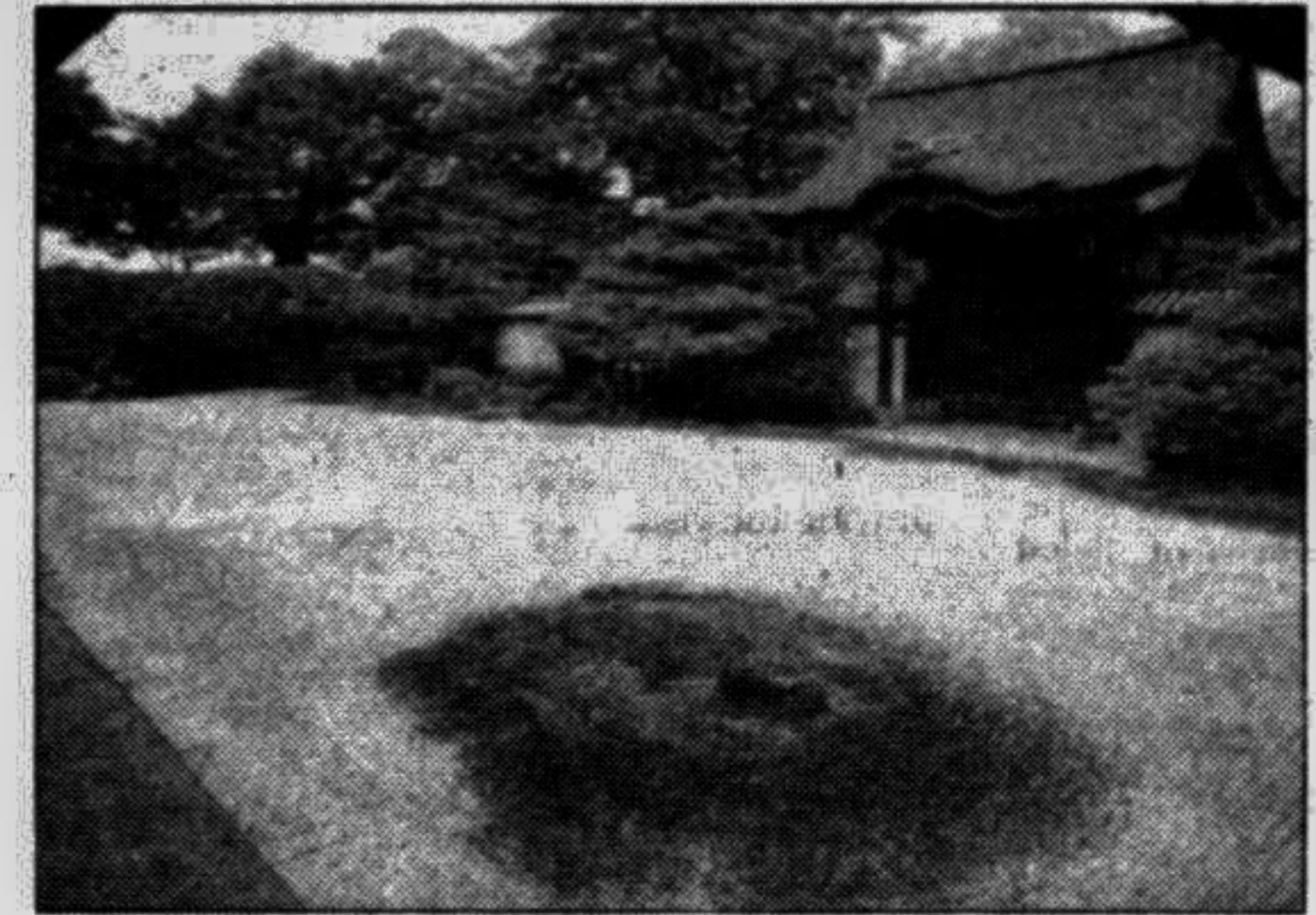
After 10 pm. Hence with no other option, we collapsed onto our beds, hungry and exhausted.

That was the beginning of what turned out to be a rich learning experience of journalistic and cultural exchanges among participants from such diverse nations as Mexico, Venezuela, certain countries in Africa, the United States, England, Canada, Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh, just to mention a few.

The time of the year was perfect — spring, and the Japanese countryside was magnificently adorned with the breathtaking beauty of flowering cherry blossoms, not to mention the numerous species of delicately textured flowers of rainbow hues as well as the budding appearance of fresh green leaves waken from their long winter slumber. The air is fragrant with the scent of cherry blossoms, which is most evident when one visits the famed Japanese gardens. A particularly enchanting variety is one appropriately named "the weeping cherry" — they are lithe and graceful and are planted by the lakes or rivers, with their supple branches heavy laden with the most delicate blush of pink blossoms. A walk through a Japanese landscaped garden during cherry blossom season must be one of life's greatest pleasures.

Sleeped in Shintoism (a major aspect of which is worshipping nature), the Japanese philosophy and culture manifests itself most eloquently in the loving care they devote to their gardens — both public and private. All temples and Shinto shrines are graced with exquisite patches of nature's glory, whether it be the luscious greens and gorgeous flowers or the spartan character of rock gardens mingled with its special sandy layout. There are thousands of them scattered throughout Japan as normal living space is quite tight and people from all walks of life need access to such havens for relaxation. Nonetheless, however tiny their living quarters may be, the average Japanese will find a corner in his home reserved for nature — even a bonsai plant is tended in such a way as to bring in a feel of the countryside.

One of the most spectacular gardens must surely be that which houses the 12th-century old temple, the Kiyomizu-dera, in Kyoto. The huge temple, built entirely of hard wood (without a single nail; and held together by an elaborate joinery system) is perched on the side of a steep cliff overlooking splendid acres of natural forests, mainly of maples. The best time to view this vast panorama of nature is autumn when the trees are ablaze with a riot of colours, from crimson to yellow to orange. The Kiyomizu-dera was founded in the 18th century, before Kyoto became the capital, and is extremely popular with everyone — from school children to housewives to businessmen; all flock there as pilgrims, beseeching favours from the eleven-headed goddess,



Zen Gardens

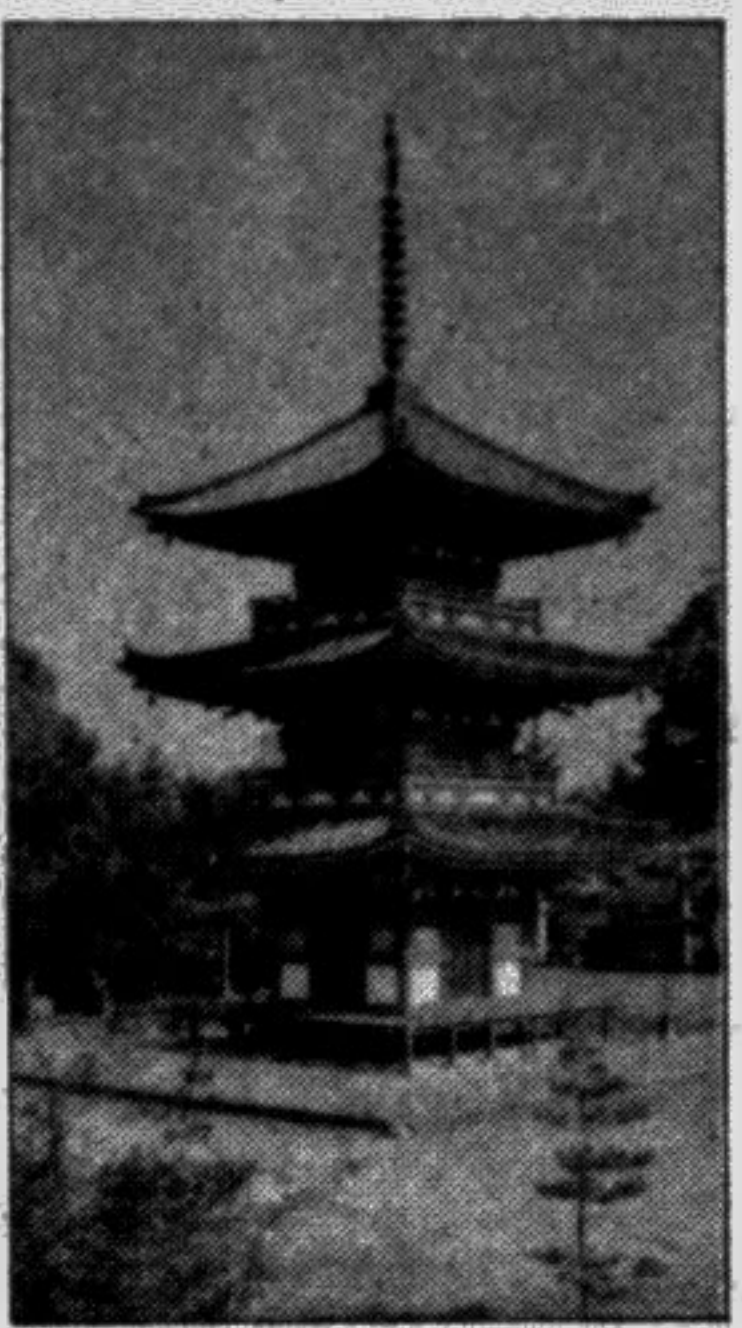
Kannon. While religion plays no role in politics, the Japanese like to "hedge their bets" — they are usually married in Shinto style and buried according to Buddhist rites. In between they make frequent trips to neighborhood Shinto shrines to pay their respects — which involves the simple ritual of clapping three times and partaking of the drinking water from a well or spring close by.

Owing to the great popularity of the temple and its eye-catching environment, a whole town has sprung up along the steep cobbled streets leading to its Torii gates. Small shops ply the highly prized ceramic ware peculiar to this area and nowadays are crammed with all kinds of souvenir and snack bars catering to tourists. That is not to say that the district has in any way lost its charm, for small restaurants as well as houses of the ancient style with its slatted second-floor windows and curved bamboo "hood" in front (to ward off animals as the houses stood right onto the

street) still abound. Kyoto, with its 1,200-year heritage, escaped bombing during World War II when it was declared an "open city" and is of special significance as the wooden structures are all that is left of prewar urban Japan. However, there are just about 2,000-odd temples, shrines and villas which are preserved as historical monuments for various fires throughout the ages have destroyed much of the ancient buildings. Keen to conserve the fabulous setting which surrounds the city, laws have been passed prohibiting the building of structures on the hillsides. Thus at the state-of-the-art convention centre where the Global Forum held its meeting, the majestic hills formed a splendid backdrop to its delightfully landscaped garden of lakes, oriental bridges and cherry blossom trees. Wherever one wanders in Kyoto, the black forests are very much there, hovering in the background. Like most cities everywhere, Kyoto has succumbed to the

pressures of an expanding population with its demands for modern amenities, resulting in the mushrooming of high rise buildings. Nevertheless, certain neighbourhoods still exist, recalling those days when the Imperial Court, nobility, the samurai class and rich merchants flocked here for rest and recreation. One such locale is the Gion Shinbashi, known for the practised charms of the Geisha women. It is a floating world of water with the Shirakawa river flowing through the district of latticed windowed houses made of wood with dusky red walls inside to give it a lush atmosphere. Creepers and cherry blossom trees grace the houses built along canals and the whole area has a discreet elegance. Here, it is not cash but introductions from valued clients which gain entry into a world of luxury and traditional entertainment. In the olden days when Kyoto was the capital and the samurai warriors were all powerful, hundreds of Geishas lived in this district — but today, there are just about fifty left.

The Indian Sea (declared a National Park) with its myriad islands sprouting from the ocean's depths, is one of the most scenic regions of Japan. A jewel in this piece of natural paradise is Kurashiki — about half an hour's ride by car from Okayama. It is an ancient city with a prosperous past dating to the famous Tokugawa period; a centre of rice and rush production as well as a busy trading centre. The sprawling houses of wealthy merchants have been preserved, some of



Henjyoji Temple

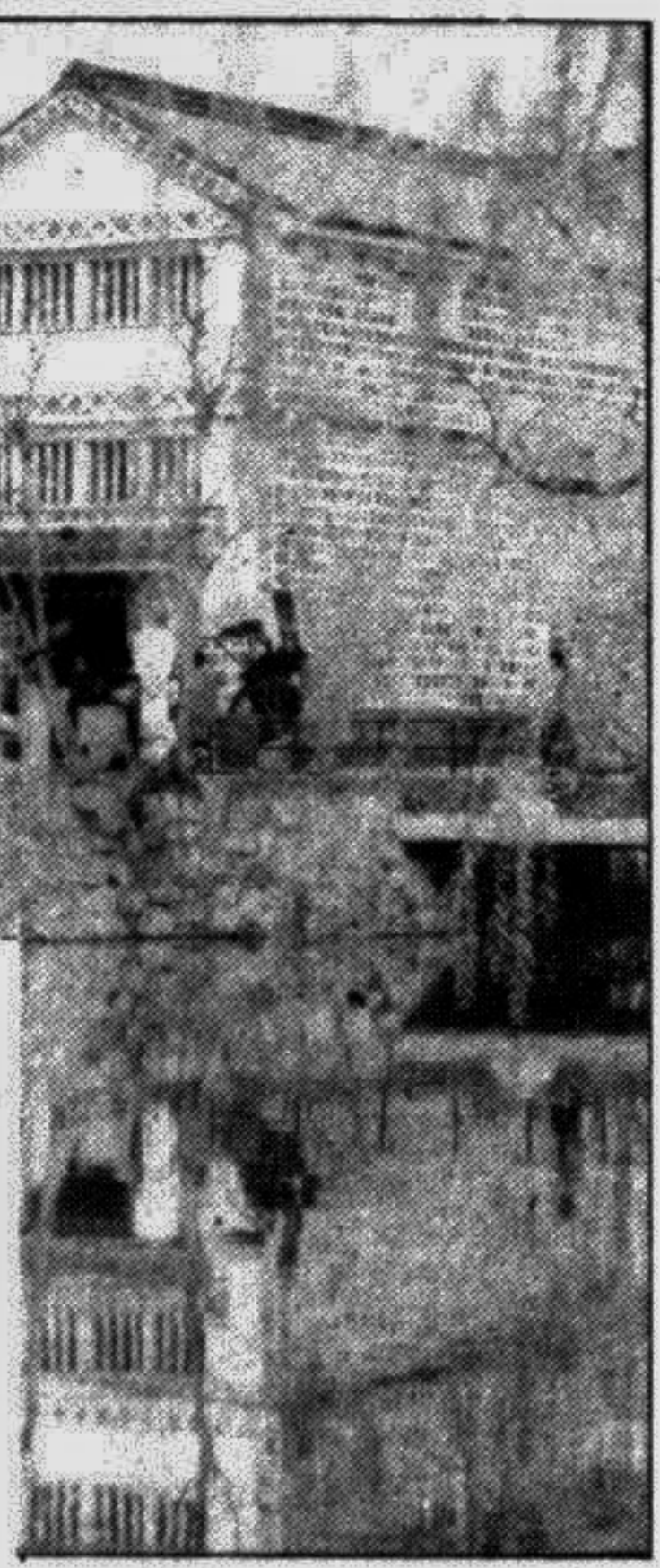
them open to the public. Its cultural heritage is substantial for this historic city is famous for its special style of architecture of white walled and black tiled buildings — especially graceful along the willow lined river running through the city. Many of these town houses (machiya) have been preserved and renovated into restaurants and shops, galleries and museums housing a rich store of historic treasures. Kurashiki is also blessed with numerous temples and shrines, some of them among the most famous in Japan — Anyoji with its history of over 650 years, Henjyoji with its three-storied pagoda and Entsuji where the great Zen priest, Ryokan, lived and worked; to name a few. All of them are set amidst serene and lovingly tended gardens of timeless beauty.

Apart from the ancient style building housing relics of the past such as the Kurashiki Archaeological Museum,

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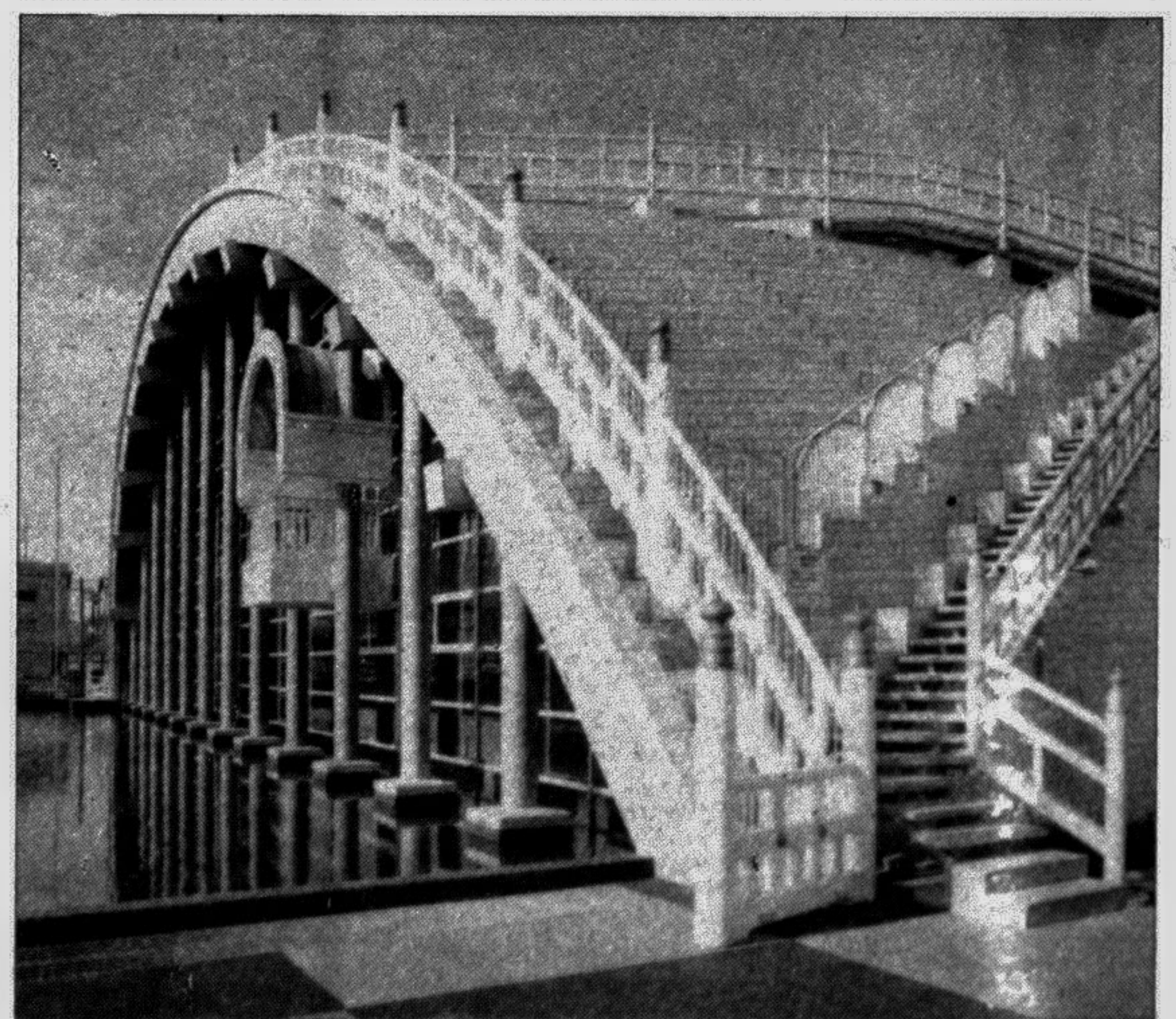
Kurashiki: Along the river



Kurashiki: Japanese rural toy museum

At the end of it, we were all dog tired and slumped on to the benches by the platform — thanking God they were at least vacant! Such are the hazards of travel in industrialized, semi-automated Japan.

By the time we reached our hotel in Okayama (a four-star beauty), it was well past midnight, and our last meal had been ages ago, in the air. We looked forward to a hot meal to calm our fraught nerves and aching bodies, only to be told that the coffee shop was closed and room service is non-ext-



Seto Ohashi Memorial Museum of Bridges.