4 The War

In 1941, the year Tezuka entered junior high school, war broke out in the Pacific. Two years later the situation was really bad. Classes at the junior high school were stopped and Tezuka was sent to work in a factory.

When finally he left junior high school in 1945, Tezuka decided to follow in his great-grandfather's footsteps and become a doctor. He especially wanted to be an army doctor, so he entered Osaka University Medical College which at the time was attached to the army. He did not stay long, however. No sooner had the entrance ceremony been completed than he was sent back to work in the factory.

The end of the war was near. B29 bombers had almost destroyed Tokyo and were now targeting Osaka. Flying back and forth over the city, they searched for factories at which to aim their bombs, then dropped their remaining bombs on civilian houses and left.

One day, Tezuka was keeping a lookout for enemy planes from the factory fire tower. "Damn! Here come the B29s," he thought to himself as the familiar drone reached his ears. He crouched low as a whistling sound approached. Fear filled him. In a flash bombs shot past him, leaving large holes in the roofs around him. In no time, there was a sea of fire below.

Bombs fell everywhere. As Tezuka scrambled down the ladder, the air raid shelter received a direct hit and many of his companions were killed. His only thought was to escape. Terrified, he ran from the factory as fast as he could and made his way to the banks of the Yodo River, one of the designated refuges. There he would be safe.

Things did not turn out as Tezuka had expected, however. When he arrived, he saw a shocking sight. The place was a smoke-filled mountain of corpses. A lot of people, it turned out, had rushed there before him, but bombs had landed right on them. Looking in the direction of Osaka, Tezuka saw the city streets lit up in a blackish-red color beneath a thick, dark fog. This could not possibly be the real world, he thought. Either he was in the middle of a nightmare, or he was already dead and before him there stretched a vision of hell.

What to do next? After a moment's thought, Tezuka decided to return to his home in Takarazuka. The railroad tracks were damaged and the trains weren't running, so the only way to travel was on foot. Joining the long line of people trying to escape from the fires raging everywhere, he set off on the thirty-kilometer journey home.

After walking a good distance, he began to feel faint for lack of food and water. Finally, with no strength left in his legs, he approached a house and knocked. "Excuse me!" he said to the woman who came to the door, "I was caught in the air raid. I'm very hungry. Could you give me something to eat?" Feeling sorry for him, the woman gave him three rice balls and some tea. That was a lot, for at the time food was rationed and each person received only a small amount of rice. Moved by this woman's kindness towards a stranger, Tezuka felt his eyes fill with tears. Not long afterwards, the area around the woman's home was bombed. When Tezuka next passed that way, all he saw were the charred remains of the house. There was no sign of the woman.

Then, about two months later, on 15 August, 1945, the Emperor's voice was heard over the radio. But the voice spoke in such a whisper that Tezuka could not catch what it was saying. That evening, he boarded a train at Takarazuka and went into Osaka. Unlike other days, the train was practically empty. It was easy to hear what other passengers were saying, and for the first time he realized that the war was over.

As he got off the train in Osaka, Tezuka noticed that the chandeliers in the concourse to the Hankyu Department Store were shining brilliantly. During the war, the use of lights had been strictly regulated. Surprised at the sight of the bright chandeliers, he went out of the station. To his amazement, there were lights on everywhere. Where had they all hidden while everything else was being flattened by the bombs, he wondered. At a loss for words, Tezuka stood quite still.

"I've been so lucky," he thought. The fact that the war had ended began to sink in to his mind at last. Slowly there came to him the joyful awareness that he was still alive. Tezuka later described the experience as follows: "I remember that instant very clearly. It has been the wellspring of all my comics. Though I've touched on many themes over the years, the central one has been 'the deep emotion of being alive' along with 'gratitude for life.'"

Comprehension Check 4

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1. Tezuka studied medicine hard at Osaka University. ( )

2. Tezuka was injured by a bomb. ( )

3. Tezuka felt his eyes fill with tears because the area around the woman's home was bombed. ( )

4. Tezuka did not know that the war was over until the evening of August 15, 1945. ( )