

Ameyoko: History

The Ameyoko shopping street runs along and partially underneath the elevated railway tracks between Ueno and Okachimachi stations. It is a symbol of the Ueno area's rebirth after World War II, during which the neighborhood had been devastated by heavy aerial bombing. The firebombing carried out by U.S. forces in the closing months of the Pacific War reduced much of central and eastern Tokyo to ashes, shattering the city's commercial system, which was squeezed further by economic controls imposed by the Allied Occupation after the end of the war in August 1945. Food and other necessities were rationed to deal with the general shortage of goods that continued into the immediate postwar period. The rationing system, alongside factors including a lack of work opportunities, tenuous government control, and the ravaged state of the economy in general, led to the rise of black markets. Mainly located near the busiest railway stations, these markets dealt in everything from rice and vegetables to military-issue sunglasses and leather jackets procured from the Occupation's stockpiles.

Ueno, the gateway to northern Japan, was one of the train stations next to which a black market sprang up. Located just south of the station, the market included a few stalls selling hard candy (*ame* in Japanese). Sugar was regulated by the Occupation authorities, so those with a craving for something sweet had to resort to various substitutes. One option was candy made from sweet potatoes, another was popsicles. Ueno's black-market dealers sold both varieties to travelers waiting for their trains at Ueno Station, and demand exceeded all expectations. Merchants of the Tohoku region (northeastern Japan) would pack their bags with goods, take the train to Ueno to sell them, and use the money they earned to buy all the candy they could carry—which they would then sell at a three- or fourfold profit back in Tohoku. The Ueno black market soon had hundreds of candy shops, which inspired the nickname Ameya Yokocho ("Candy Store Alley"). Shortened to Ameyoko, the market was controlled by Japanese ex-soldiers formerly stationed in mainland Asia, who established a local merchants' association in 1949.

The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 brought about a sudden demand for supplies and equipment, fueling the Japanese economy and causing a new influx of American goods. Supplies meant for the U.S. troops stationed in the Far East were soon being diverted and traded as contraband on the streets of Tokyo. Shops selling all-American merchandise such as Hershey's chocolate, Zippo lighters, Ray-Ban sunglasses, and blue jeans, alongside military-issue essentials including soap and razors, opened up near

Okachimachi station, south of the Ueno market. The trade in all things American led people to call the cluster of shops America Yokocho (“America Alley”). These shops eventually merged with the neighboring candy alley, and the two “Ameyokos” became one.

The merchants of Ameyoko adapted to changes in tastes and demand over the decades that followed. They later abandoned candy in favor of canned goods, then moved into fresh fish and exotic novelties. The Ameyoko of today is a hodgepodge of shops dealing in everything from seafood and fruit to cosmetics and chocolate. This reflects the street’s history of always providing a space for merchants supplying whatever the people of Tokyo have an appetite for.