

1950 - YUKIKA SOHMA: 'JAPAN CAN BECOME REBORN'

By Mary Lean

06/02/2021



The Japanese flag was flying outside the conference centre as 64 Japanese arrived in Caux in 1950, to be welcomed by a chorus singing in Japanese. It was a moving moment: back in Japan, still under American occupation, displaying the flag was forbidden.

The delegation included seven prefectural governors, a number of Diet members and the mayors of four cities, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One of the 10 women in the delegation was Yukika Sohma.

Yukika was the daughter of Yukio Ozaki, revered as the father of Japanese parliamentary democracy. He served in the Diet for 63 years, and was imprisoned during the World War II for his opposition to war. For Yukika the years leading up to World War II were 'like living in suffocation', as laws were passed to crush liberal thinking. The ideas of Initiatives of Change (formerly

known as Moral Rearmament), which she encountered at this time, were 'like a fresh breeze blowing from above when all around were tight walls'.

Yukika acted as interpreter for the delegation, as it travelled on to Italy, Germany, France, Britain and the US. Wherever they went, the Mayor of Hiroshima, Shinzo Hamai, gave dignitaries a gift from his city: a small cross made out of the heart of an ancient camphor tree, planted when the city was founded in 1588. The outside of the tree had been destroyed by the atomic blast, but its core survived.



Mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Caux

On the fifth anniversary of the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, the delegation was in California. They were invited to speak on CBS radio. Yukika described their encounters at the IofC conference centre in Caux as a 'conference of answers, of results that only need multiplication to build a solid cure to world problems'. In a 'family of nations where differences of race, of class and of point of view were superseded... we saw and experienced reconciliation of hearts.... We saw that with this new spirit Japan can become reborn.'

Shinzo Hamai also spoke in the broadcast, describing the 'nightmare' that had

happened to his city. He quoted words that he had heard at the conference centre in Caux, 'Peace is people becoming different' and declared, 'I for one intend to start this effort from Hiroshima. The one dream and hope left to our surviving citizens is to re-establish the city as a pattern for peace.'

We saw and experienced reconciliation of hearts.... We saw that with this new spirit Japan can become reborn. The wording on the Hiroshima monument was under discussion at the time, with fierce advocates of the view that it should condemn the United States. On his return home, Hamai championed an alternative wording, which eventually won the day: 'Let all the souls here rest in peace, for we shall not repeat the evil'.

Yukika Sohma devoted the rest of her life to encouraging Japan to rebuild its relations with its neighbours. In 1978 she called on every Japanese to give one yen to help refugees in Southeast Asia. Within three months she had raised 120 million yen. The organization she founded later became the Association for Aid and Relief, providing humanitarian relief and supporting landmine clearance. She remained its president until she died in 2008.

'Apology is a Key to the Future' Author(s) Yukika Sohma

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By YUKIKA SOHMA

The era of Showa is now behind us and we live in the era of Heisei -'achieving peace'. The term comes from the Chinese classics and like most such quotations can be interpreted as having a deeper philosophical meaning. Some scholars say it means that when the mind is at peace the outside world can attain peace. In other words, individual peace of heart is a prerequisite for peace.

The death of the Emperor was followed in Japan by full media coverage of the turbulent Showa era and of the Emperor's life. This brought him much closer to the people. From his poems we learned about his aspirations for peace and the welfare of the people.

Japan was an insignificant island nation in the Far East until she won the wars against China (1894-5) and Russia (1904-5). Then she began to be counted as one of the major world powers. This gave the army and navy positions of honour in the eyes of the people. Representative government was introduced in 1890, but Western observers were skeptical. 'It is doubtful,' said one commentator, 'if constitutionalism has made any deep impression on the life or mind of Japan.'

During the brief Taisho era (1912-26), following the Meiji era, there were sincere attempts to make representative government work. But as Japan was engulfed by world affairs, the young bud of democracy was ruthlessly crushed. Japan was badly hit by the recession following World War I. The farmers, who constituted the bulk of the population, were especially hurt. Many young girls were sold to brothels by their destitute families. There was high unemployment, at a time when social security benefits were unknown. Meanwhile the politicians were fighting among themselves. People wanted change.

Narrow escape

In 1921, the Washington Conference set a ratio for naval shipbuilding by the world powers, which placed Japan at a disadvantage to the US and Britain. This shocked not only the men in uniform but also the people, who began to feel that unfair outside pressure had been put on Japan.

It was around this time that I personally began to feel squeezed between public opinion and the convictions of my father, Yukio Ozaki, who was a pioneer of parliamentary democracy in Japan and, as Mayor of Tokyo, was instrumental in giving Washington DC its flowering cherry trees. My father believed that disarmament was the way to the future. The diehards regarded him as a traitor and he received physical threats.

On one occasion two truckloads of ruffians stormed into our house shouting that they had come to take his life. Father and I escaped from the back of the house, climbed over the wooden fence of the factory next door and took refuge in its boiler room. It so happened that the next morning we had planned to go on a two-day trek on horseback and we went ahead with this plan, escorted by policemen on bicycles. I was nervous, but my father said jokingly, 'This is the road along which criminals were escorted during the feudal days. It's a rare occasion to be treated like this, so let's enjoy as much as we can!'

The years leading to the outbreak of the war were like living in suffocation. One after another, laws were passed to 'crush liberal thinking. It was as if some power unknown to us was gradually engulfing the nation and rational thinking was being replaced by chauvinist outcry. One longed for fresh air. I felt desperate, because there was nothing I could do.

It was then that I encountered the ideas of Moral Re-Armament. I was convinced by the thought that if one wants to see change in others, the place to start is with oneself. It gave me hope to know that I could be one with like-minded people around the world. It was like a fresh breeze blowing from above when all around were tight walls.

I have no intention of making excuses for the suffering inflicted during the war. There were times when I wanted to excuse myself from the blame, because I was not part of the Establishment. But I have learnt to take responsibility for what my nation has done.

Whatever the role and responsibility of the Emperor in the beginning of and during the war, he changed post-war history when he took the blame on himself at his meeting with General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces. I had a chance to visit the General in New York in 1957 with Mrs Shidzue Kato, then a Member of the House of Councillors. The General described his encounter with Emperor Hirohito in detail and commented, 'I consider him the Number One gentleman of Japan.'

Fresh wind

No amount of apology is enough to heal the wounds caused by wrong deeds. But honest apology is a key to the future. The Emperor himself voiced his regret at different occasions, while the apologies of Prime Minister Kishi, visiting Australia and the South East Asian nations in 1957, opened a new page in our relationships.

Today there is freedom of thought and speech in Japan. The fresh wind is blowing from all directions. The Japanese people in general see a need for us to play a constructive role in world affairs in proportion to our economic power. Japan is searching for a tangible policy to follow.

The world has grown beyond the stage when, like a tree, it can benefit by severing branches. It is more like an organic body in which every small part counts. The oft repeated saying is now a reality - a society which has grown materially will perish unless this is matched by moral and spiritual growth. Every nation needs the understanding and sympathetic help of other nations.

It is the first time in history that a nation with such economic power does not have equivalent military power. What will Japan's aspirations be? This must be the concern of the world family. The young generation is waiting to feel at one with the world.

Yukika Sohma is a past President of the Federation of Asian Women's Associations and founded Japan's Association to Aid the Refugees.