



Rev. Sumio Koga: "Older Japanese need to talk about the relocation"

Photo by Sam Vestal

Pastor tells story of Japanese Christians

By MARYBETH VARCADOS

One hundred years ago, in San Francisco, three young Japanese men were baptized as Christians, marking the beginnings of the Japanese Christian mission in North America.

A little over half-a-century later, of the 100,000 Japanese destined for relocation centers because of the war in the Pacific, 6,000 applied for return to Japan.

The joyful idealism and the crushing disillusionment of these two facts are major themes in the centennial story of Japanese-American Christians, as compiled in a 384-page volume just off the presses, edited by the Rev. Sumio Koga, pastor of Westview Presbyterian Church in Watsonville.

The Rev. Mr. Koga's book is a matter-of-fact compilation of joy and sorrow, drawing no conclusions itself, leaving that up to the reader.

The bulk of the book is an area-by-area census and brief history of Japanese Protestant churches in North America, including Canada and Hawaii. The emotional part is told in five essays and two pictures, one picture in particular of a drawing done by the minister in the relocation camp in Jerome, Ark.

The question was loyalty to the United States. The Japanese men were asked to enlist in the U.S. Army, and when the Christian suggested that it be left to personal preference, he was beaten by two other men.

The dramatic painting of the scene, done by Henry Sugimoto, carries this inscription: "When I received the blow, I felt as my own child hitting me, for they were of my own kind. Each blow reminded me of God's will who taught me of my own lack of suffering."

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"The coming generation is curious about

the relocation," the Rev. Mr. Koga says. "They were very little when it happened. It does the older people good to begin to talk about the experience, to get it off their chests."

He spent three years compiling the book which has been printed in a limited edition of 4,000 and sells for \$20.

It is a prelude to a five-day centennial celebration of Japanese Christians who will gather in San Francisco in October, including a delegation from Watsonville. On Oct. 5, the Japanese-U.S. Christian conference will bring 200 delegates from Japan; other conferences will be for the pastors, lay Christians, youth and women and will be held at the Sheraton-Palace Hotel and the First Congregational Church in downtown San Francisco. Japanese Christian art and historical documents will be on exhibit at the Christ United Presbyterian Church in Japan Town.

The Rev. Mr. Koga's personal story is part of that history.

"I was a PK," he laughs, "a preacher's kid, born in Oakland." His father, who originally was a Shinto, was a student in the Presbyterian theological seminary at the time; his mother had been reared a Christian.

When he was in third grade, they lived in Watsonville and his father was pastor of what was then called the Japanese Presbyterian Church. Koga, and his five brothers and sisters, attended the East Lake elementary school; Mrs. Hopkins was his teacher.

"Then my folks decided to go back to Japan. My father had an assignment as a Christian missionary to Manchuria." They lived in Manchuria from 1925-35, and since the young boy's Japanese was not quite adequate, he was put back a grade. "But being a Nisei, I could speak English so well I helped teach it in high school."

In those years, Japan had taken over in Manchuria and "was trying to westernize that area — to put in sidewalks, a sewage system . . . make it more like a democracy by using industrial improvements from the United States."

The young Nisei saw American movies of the day — Shirley Temple, Harold Lloyd, and all — all with Japanese subtitles.

The political scene changed as new war lords took over in Manchuria, and the family

moved back to California. Young Koga went to junior college in Sacramento, then on to study American History at UC Berkeley. Dr. Priestly, in diplomatic history, told the students one day in the fall of 1941, his senior year, "You fellows sit there so nonchalant, but by December you'll be drafted. There will be a war."

The war broke out, and instead of being drafted Koga was sent to the relocation camp at Tule Lake. His college courses were completed, but he was not allowed to go through graduation exercises to get his diploma.

Instead, it was sent through the mails — to the relocation camp.

"So I taught classes in the camp. American history, and it wasn't a popular course."

The student relocation committee of the American Friends Service Committee got him out of the camp in a few months, processed his papers, and he was off to study at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

"I went to the local draft board and said I was going into the ministry. I guess they believed my word because they let me go."

He spoke a little about cynicism: "The relocation made everyone stop to think. Here I was a happy-go-lucky Nisei, back from Manchuria where I saw the attempts at democracy all change, then I come back to the U.S. and it's not as democratic here as I thought it was . . ."

After graduation from the seminary, he served on the board of the Presbyterian National Mission and was associate pastor of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church in the heart of the city, the only place Japanese were allowed to assemble in the years 1942-43.

"I met a girl in Chicago and married her in Nebraska . . . Scotts Bluff," he continued.

Dolas Okawaki is the daughter of a Nebraska farmer, a graduate of the University of Nebraska and was an employe of a large music firm in the windy city. Her forefathers had helped build the transcontinental railroad.

"Japanese are called the 'quiet Americans,'" mused Koga as he told his story.

Letters written in Japanese began arriving for Koga, begging him to return to the West Coast. They were from laymen, people

who could not speak English but could communicate with him because of his years in Manchuria.

"It was my calling," he said simply.

He returned to Sacramento, then to Stockton, and finally to Watsonville, in 1960, replacing the Rev. Michio Ito, pastor of Westview Presbyterian Church for many years who later returned to Japan.

Westview Presbyterian has seen some changes in the Rev. Mr. Koga's 17 years there. The widening of Riverside Drive changed the layout some, with a larger parking lot as a result. And a new manse has been built, the Koga residence. The 138 parishioners are mainly Japanese, though some Caucasians have come in through marriage, and the second-generation Nisei are the ruling body.

"Newcomers" are a group of refugees from Manchuria who were brought to the U.S. by the displaced persons act and through the influence of Unosuke Shikuma, a pillar of the church who insisted that they become Christian. Shikuma helped them out, loaning them money to set up a now-flourishing flower industry. The adjustment has been rugged, the Rev. Mr. Koga says, between the oldtimers and the newcomers in his church. "In the near future, we have to adjust to these newcomers."

His own family didn't come along until he and Mrs. Koga had been married for 11 years. Now their eldest, James, has just left for Massachusetts where he will attend MIT, majoring in engineering; John is a senior at Watsonville High School, and Jennifer is a sophomore.

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Why do Japanese switch from Buddhism or Shintoism to Christianity?

The Rev. Mr. Koga thinks that there are two reasons. One, the Japanese want to become "western" when they move to America, so they adopt the predominant western religion; two, the puritanic theology with its sense of justice and righteousness is very appealing, he thinks.

A third reason he sees for the switch, especially in early years, was that the young Japanese men, who were reared in rigidly-controlled backgrounds, were helped by and attracted to compassionate Christian people like Dr. Ernest Struge, a true friend to the Japanese at the turn of the century in San Francisco, and about whom the Rev. Mr. Koga has written in his book.