

HIMEJI REVISITED

"You're dreaming if you think you'll find him after all this time," My wife says as we finish packing for a trip to Japan in 1988.

"The Japanese don't move around much. His family probably still lives in the same place in Himeji" I reply, checking drawers for a missing item on my packing list.

"But you don't even have his address," she says.

"In his last letter, he told me that he had gone to work for the Japan Railway. I'm willing to bet he still works there."

"But they must employ thousands."

I zip up my bag and swing it over my shoulder. "I'll find him," I say.

Three hours later we are on our way to JFK, our destination Narita Airport in Japan, to visit our daughter Andy who has been living in Fujishiro in Ibaraki Province for a year. She teaches English in the J.E.T. program recently created by the Japanese government to bring native English speakers to teach English in the public schools. While we are in Japan, I am determined to locate a man who was like a kid brother to me during the occupation of that country and whom I have not seen in forty-two years.

When WW II ended in 1945, I was nineteen and recently commissioned a Second Lt. in the infantry. I found myself a part of the army of occupation in Himeji, a dot on the map not far from Osaka in Japan. It wasn't long before sixteen-year old Yukihiro Maeda landed on my doorstep and asked to serve as my houseboy.

With jobs and food in short supply in post war Japan, the Japanese government had initiated a stipend for Japanese working on U.S. Military bases there. It was not uncommon in those days, for an American officer to engage a

youngster as a valet of sorts; a job popular among Japanese boys who found it a more prestigious endeavor than being put to work as a laborer. The job commanded not only respect but also some fringe benefits like meals and small *presentos*, like chocolate, chewing gum and occasionally some pocket money.

Jocko as I had dubbed him, was one of three children and had been scheduled to go to military school as had his father before him. When the war came to an abrupt end, it ended Jocko's military career as well.

Jocko made my bed according to army regulations, shined my shoes, saw to my personal laundry and despite howling protests, insisted on toweling me dry after I stepped out of the shower. Jocko was like Cato lying in wait to pounce on an unsuspecting Inspector Clouseau. No threats or bellowing deterred Jocko from his self-appointed mission as gentlemen's gentlemen. A strong bond developed between us and when I was rotated back to the States about a year later, I brought home an album crammed with photos, many of which included Jocko, as well as the two war orphans I had unofficially adopted and Jocko helped attend to. We corresponded for several years, the number of letters dwindling with time until at last we lost track of one another.

Soon after we settled in our business hotel in Fujishiro, I start making inquiries to the Japan Railway with the help of a bi-lingual colleague from my daughter Andy's school. One phone call after another to the railroad turned up nothing. "We are sorry but we have no record of anyone by the name of Yukihiro Maeda," they say.

My wife thinks we have reached a dead end but I am not ready to give up.

"We'll rearrange our schedule so we can spend a day in Himeji," I say, records have to be kept somewhere, like a town hall for instance. That's what we'll try next."

The official who greets us at the modern Town Hall in Himeji is urbane and solicitous. He shrugs his shoulders however and tells our guide and interpreter

Tanaka san, that we must realize that forty two years is a long time. Many things have changed and with no address, to find the family may prove to be impossible. But he is so intrigued by the story that Tanaka san tells that he summons three clerks who go to work immediately.

They plunge into dusty files, locating old discolored town maps and aged tax rolls, investigating any conceivable reference that might yield a clue. From time to time the official comes over to us with a bow and a smile as we wait anxiously. "We are trying," he says. "Do not give up hope."

Time drags by. We are offered tea, which we accept gratefully. The clerks continue the search with amazing dedication, their own assignments sitting incompleated on their desks. I wonder where else in the world civil servants would be so willing and helpful.

Two hours later, great news - the original address of the Maeda family is located. The disheartening news is that the house burned down many years ago. In its place is an auto repair garage. The owners of the garage are contacted but state that they have no knowledge of the family. More tea is served and the pace is quickened. Every neighbor on the street is called. "Yes," they remember the family but "No," they do not know where they have gone. Finally, one of the clerks has found a neighbor who knows the telephone number of Jocko's brother. We are jubilant.

"Ask them what we can do to show our appreciation," Andy says to our interpreter. He tells her it is not necessary to do anything, that for them our happiness is reward enough. Nevertheless, we run out and bring back boxes of sweet cakes as an offering of our gratitude. It is the least we can do.

Now we are out on the street at a public phone. Tanaka san places the call. There is no answer. Once again we must wait. We visit beautiful Himeji Castle to while away some time, losing ourselves in the history of this ancient place whose halls still echo with the roar of Shogun voices, the rattle of Samurai swords. I recall riding on horseback at full gallop outside the castle gates. Now it is a park.

We place a second call, still no answer. The suspense is maddening. There is nothing else to do but stroll along the tree lined, traffic jammed main street and peer into shop windows. I comment on the transformation of this once quiet town. One-story wooden structures huddled one against the other have been replaced with contemporary office buildings and stores.

Now is it three-thirty. Tanaka san places a third call. This time, success! Jocko's sister-in-law answers the phone. Tanaka san tells her briefly about our search for Yukihiro Maeda. We learn from her that Jocko is well. He is married and lives about half an hour away from our hotel in Osaka. Are we really about to find this man?

We take down Jocko's phone number but are told that we will not find him at home until five-thirty. His sister-in-law offers to phone his household and let his wife know we are trying to reach him. We give his sister-in-law the name of our hotel. Once again we must mark time.

By six p.m. we are back in our hotel room. There is no message from Jocko so we try his number. There is no answer. We shower and start to dress for dinner. Could we have traveled this far and come this close only to have missed him due to some quirk of fate? Two more unanswered calls leave us close to despair. We are scheduled to leave in the morning. Then at seven o'clock the phone rings. I pick up the receiver.

"Jocko," I yell, forgetting that I must now use the polite form of address, 'Maeda san'. "I knew I'd find you. How are you? Where do you live? I must get to see you *tonight*, I leave here tomorrow." I am so excited I scarcely hear Maeda san's quiet reply that he is already downstairs in the hotel lobby.

I grab my wife's shoulders and shake her silly. "Do you believe this? He's here. He's downstairs and his wife is with him. I found him," I yell at the ceiling. "Forty-two f----g years later and I found him. I'm going downstairs now. Come down as soon as you're ready," I say to my wife. She is excited and breathless, trying to apply mascara with fingers vibrating like a jackhammer. Triumphant, I dash from the room.

My wife and daughter arrive in the lobby ten minutes later to find the three of us pouring over a large photo album. Familiar black and white photos faded to sepia had been precisely arranged and neatly pasted, the album in mint condition. I think of our old army album at home and am ashamed that it is falling to pieces.

At first encounter we had embraced unabashedly and stared at one another in disbelief. There are broad smiles all around. This includes hotel guests and employees who sense what is taking place. I introduce my wife and daughter to a slender, good-looking man, tall by Japanese standards, and to his attractive wife. Bows are exchanged. I bring them up to date breathlessly. Now all of us pour over later photos as Maeda san grew to manhood and we follow the thread of his life. He is retired after many years from an important position with the Japan Railroad and has two daughters, both university students. The contrast in the two cultures is evident. I am dressed in a sport shirt and casual jacket, bubbling over enthusiastically, Maeda san, impeccably dressed in a dark suit and tie suitable for a board meeting. He sits quietly, smiling, nodding his head, emotions in check. His wife sits politely beside him in a simple print dress, her hands folded in her lap. He interprets for her; speaks to us in a halting but clear English.

We go to dinner and recall the time spent together as victor and vanquished; master and servant. Now we are simply old friends, for the friendship is what is left after all this time. For forty-two years we had lived parallel lives on opposite sides of the globe, had married, raised families and prospered. We are in fact strangers but for the photographs and memories of a sojourn long ago.

We talk about our present lives, our families, our children; talk about rice farming, Mt. Fuji, Disneyland. And because they have teen-age daughters they tell us they know all about Michael Jackson and Sylvester Stallone. "They are very popular here," they say.

For dinner, special delicacies are ordered. We are coached in the proper use of *hashi* (chopsticks). Though I know how to handle them well. Maeda san

demonstrates patiently. Our conversation is punctuated with laughter as we down bottles of Japanese beer and sake. Every sentence that passes between us is a miracle. Andy takes pictures. We draw our chairs close together so we will fit into the camera's eye. "These pictures will be in color this time," Andy says. It is a new chapter for a new album.

A year later, Maeda san is an honored guest at the very private Shinto ceremony when Andy is married to a Japanese teacher of English. A year later when her first son is born, Maeda san comes with a gift and good wishes. He bounces the baby on his knee. My wife and I observe with moist eyes, still unable to believe that such an event is taking place.

We are still in touch at Christmas time each year, exchanging the greetings of the season and news of the course our lives have taken.