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Memoirs of the Relief Society in Japan, 1951-1991

Yanagida Toshiko

*My poems are my tears,
as my eyes are moistened at once
in joy and in sorrow.*

—Yanagida Toshiko

I feel as if I am looking back at my own life in the Church when I try to trace the history of the Relief Society in Japan. The two are closely intertwined. In August 1949, I traveled nine hours from Nagoya to the mission headquarters in Tokyo to be baptized by Elder Ted Price in the presence of my father who lived in Urawa, Saitama. Mission President Edward L. Clissold confirmed me. I returned to Nagoya by myself on the same day. There were no Latter-day Saint meetings held in Nagoya at that time. The closest area that had meetings was Narumi, a suburb of Nagoya, and I made the two-hour trek there every week. So I wrote a letter to Mission President Vinal G. Mauss, who filled the position in September 1949, asking permission to begin holding regular meetings in Nagoya. A Sunday School was then started there. Toward the end of April 1950, a new missionary came to the area, and he served as branch president. A couple of sister missionaries also arrived at about the same time. In those days, the congregation of the Nagoya Branch consisted of my husband, Tohkichi (who was baptized September 30, 1950), me, and another young single sister, in addition to the missionaries.

The women of the branch, including any visitors, began to meet in the sister missionaries' apartment on Tuesday nights on the initiative of newly arrived Sister Philomena Andrade.¹ She shared her ideas of tidying houses, arranging cupboards, cooking simple dishes, and answering questions

about the gospel. Elder Wayne R. Harlane, the branch president, said, "Let's call it a women's meeting as we cannot organize anything officially." Thanks to Sister Andrade's attractive personality, five to six women, including high school students, gathered regularly. Cooking classes were

Yanagida Toshiko

Yanagida Toshiko is a Latter-day Saint who was baptized long ago. She is a daughter of Takagi Tomigoro, who was baptized in 1915 and was an important Church member in Japan before the mission closed in 1924. Her uncle Takahashi Nikichi joined the Church in 1908 and later brought his brother Tomigoro into the Church. Sister Yanagida was a Japanese pioneer in the post-World War II era, was called as the first Relief Society president in Japan, and served in that office for many years. She has been



Courtesy Yanagida Toshiko

Sister Yanagida Toshiko in 2000.

a very modern woman, and her character is marked by a studious and flexible mind. She enjoys composing *tanka* (a form of Japanese poetry). She also wrote an autobiography entitled *Ashiato* (My footsteps) and was the editor and chief writer of *Seiki wo koete—Matsujitsu-Seito-Jesu-Kirisuto-Kyokai Dendo 100-nen no Ayumi* (Beyond the century—a story of 100 years of the LDS Church in Japan). The following article is my translation of her memoirs, written in commemoration of the Relief Society's sesquicentennial in 1991, that tell the story of the organization's development and her contributions to it.

—Numano Jiro

the main attraction. Because missionaries were often transferred, this women's gathering was sometimes held at night and other times during the day to accommodate the missionaries' schedules. Since there were no chapels then, we sat in the missionaries' *tatami* (straw mat) room and cooked inexpensive beefsteaks, pancakes, cookies, cakes, and so forth using an oven I had brought from my home and placed on a portable stove. On rainy days though, I sometimes found only myself and two sister missionaries there. The food we cooked together was a blessing to my home in those days when Japan had not yet made an economic recovery from the war.

Once, canned food and used clothes were sent to us from the U.S. Relief Society as welfare supplies. We walked with the sister missionaries on a hot summer day to deliver the goods to families whose children were attending Sunday School. In those days, my children were the only children of Latter-day Saint parents, so my family was both very surprised and thrilled to receive the goods. Another time when goods were sent to us, we delivered an especially great number of supplies to a very poor family, but the father of the family sold the goods to buy more *sake* (alcohol). The missionaries and I keenly realized how challenging welfare work can be at times. The experience, I think, helped me understand the gospel very much. As I was a new member then, the conversation I had with Sister Andrade strengthened my testimony of the gospel and taught me about brotherly love.

The members and those interested in the Church met together often. The missionaries' residence or a member's house typically became a meeting place, since there were no chapels in those days. On cold days, we wore an overcoat to meetings; on hot summer days, we burned a mosquito-repellant stick. We had no air conditioning. Although the room we typically met in was narrow and inconvenient, it was a good environment to nurture love among those who came.

Bazaars held a very important position in Relief Society work in Japan. We asked a Church member in the occupation army to purchase chocolate, chewing gum, and so forth from the PX (post exchange) at a low price, and then we sold the items at the busiest quarters in Sakae-machi, Nagoya, holding a bazaar at the square where a TV tower now stands. We sold chocolates, in a box hung from our necks, at an important intersection for three days in 1950 and 1951. Shops nearby complained to us that the prices were too low, so we got their permission to continue selling by limiting the activity to only three days. At that time, one U.S. dollar corresponded to 360 yen. Japan was destitute of commodities, and so U.S. members of the



FIG. 1. Branch Relief Society presidency in 1951 pictured with Relief Society sisters. Front row, second from left, Adachi Yoshie; third from left, Yanagida Toshiko; fourth from left, Fumie Swenson.

Church and missionaries, who gave us much assistance, all looked rich in the eyes of the Japanese.

Missionaries served for three years then, and their clothes often wore out before they went home. Patching trousers, washing bedclothes, and beating cotton mattresses to soften them all became tasks of the Relief Society. When members were few, the Relief Society president took this responsibility, but sometimes I did, too.

Called as Relief Society President

Edward L. Clissold presided over the mission in Japan from 1948 to 1949, and Vinal G. Mauss presided from 1949 to 1953. A very modest branch Relief Society first saw the light of day in Nagoya as early as 1951 with me, Sister Yanagida, as president, and Sister Adachi Yoshie and Sister Fumie Swenson as counselors (fig. 1). (There was no secretary at that time.)

Hilton A. Robertson served as the next mission president (1953–55). Following Robertson was Paul C. Andrus, who presided over the Northern Far East Mission for two terms or six years (1955–62). On February 26, 1961, during President Andrus's term, I was called to be Relief Society district president of the West Central District. Sister Suzuki Toshi was called as

president of the Central District (1962), Sister Matsushita Shoko as president of the Hokkaidō District (1963), and Sister Miyara of the Okinawa District (1963). I was responsible for eleven branches—Nagoya, Kanazawa, Kyoto, Okamachi, Abeno, Nishinomiya, Sannomiya, Okayama, Hiroshima, Yanai, and Fukuoka—and was to attend each branch conference. In order for me to attend remote branches in Hiroshima, Yanai, and Fukuoka, I took a night train with the district president, then Suzuki Shozo. There was no *Shinkansen* (bullet train) at that time.

Three years later, on June 21, 1964, Mission President Dwane N. Andersen (1962–65) called me to be the Relief Society president of the Northern Far East Mission. Sister Uenoyama Emiko was called to the Relief Society presidency of the West Central district. I called Sister Yaginuma Setsuko to be my counselor (the only one at that time), and Sister Tange to be secretary. These sisters resided in Nagoya, making it convenient to conduct regular business. Before this time, the mission president's wife served as the president of the Relief Society in the international missions, but the responsibility was being transferred to local members. I am not sure whether this shift occurred all over the world or just in Japan. With her duty of overseeing Relief Society, Sister Peggy Andersen had put a message in *Seito-No-Michi*, the Church's monthly magazine in Japan (fig. 2), but she turned over this task to me. My main responsibilities, however, were to attend district conferences of the four districts, to assist Relief Societies in the districts, and to make an annual financial report to the Relief Society General Presidency in Salt Lake City.

During this era, Relief Society had a separate budget from the mission budget. Expenses for Relief Society—such as transportation fees, correspondence, and so forth—had to be borne by the organization itself. Revenue came from female Church members eighteen years and older, who, in



FIG. 2. *Seito-No-Michi* (Way of the Saints), the Church magazine in Japan in 1962.

principle, automatically became members of Relief Society. Each member paid thirty yen a year and was given a membership card. Of the thirty yen, twenty went to mission headquarters, five to the district, and five to the branch Relief Society fund. Branch Relief Societies raised additional money by holding bazaars, dinner parties, and other activities; the district Relief Society occasionally held bazaars, too. Because our budget was separate from that of the priesthood leadership, we saved money by using night trains and ferryboats to go to Hokkaidō and Okinawa when attending district conferences. At midnight, I would travel on a ferryboat from Aomori to Hokkaidō; when going to Okinawa, the train trip took twenty-seven hours from Nagoya to Kagoshima, then I had to wait for the ship and it took another twenty-five hours on a smaller ship to Naha, Okinawa. In those days, Okinawa was under U.S. occupation, so I carried my passport with me and had to get the required vaccinations before boarding the ship there. When I first visited Okinawa in 1964, I found cars driving on the right-hand side of the road and discovered that money was in dollars and cents—I remember the bus fare was 3 cents.

When I traveled to these district conferences, members of the local Relief Societies were kind enough to let me stay at their homes. Visiting remote districts offered opportunities to become familiar with local leaders such as Sisters Hachimine Yoshiko, Miyara Toyoko, and Tohma Misao, who took me to see the remains of the war in Okinawa. Sister Andersen advised me to visit four branches—there were only four at that time—in Hokkaidō when I was there to attend district conference in late September 1964. I stayed at the Matsushitas' in Sapporo, at a Sister Takahashi's in Otaru, at the Ohkawaras' in Asahikawa, and at the Kawasakis' in Muro-ran, where I saw the sole Latter-day Saint chapel made of wood in Japan. Those homes were all heated, but I saw large electric fans that helped cool the temperature in the chapel's hall where district conference was held in Okinawa in November of the same year. There were two branches in Okinawa, Naha, and Futenma. In Futenma, a half-cylindrical barrack disposed of by the U.S. Army was used as a meetinghouse and as the missionary quarters. Experiencing the reverse sequence of seasons during the trip to Okinawa that fall, I realized how long Japan is, even though it is a small country.

In addition to visiting district conferences and the various district Relief Societies, I also had to oversee the organization's finances. Because Relief Society had its own budget, I had to send an annual financial report to the general board. This was a perplexing job because it was difficult for many branches to understand how to complete the forms. I often had to correct some parts before totaling up reports from the

districts. It took Sister Yaginuma and me a few days to check the reports with an abacus, then we filled in the mission form, took it to mission headquarters, checked it again with Sister Andersen, and finally submitted it to the general board. It took a lot of time to calculate and fill in the form, so I had to stay the night at the mission home. Although my children were all boys and my husband was busy with his work, I managed to leave home because my mother, who had joined the Church, was in good health and was willing to fill in for me at home. Still, leaving home for days (it took a week just to go to Okinawa) burdened family members, which bothered me a lot; this was the period of my life when I was worried about my home affairs.

Manuals

When the Church was experiencing a boom of international growth in the mid-twentieth century, there was a long gap before the Relief Society lessons were translated into other languages. Thus, we did not have any manuals and we depended wholly on sister missionaries for materials. Separate, mimeographed booklets were sent to us, subject by subject, during the era of President Andrus. There were five subjects: visiting teaching messages, theology, social science, literature, and work meeting. One year for the subject of social science we read a small book about Japanese history that had been written after the war. For the first time I learned of historical figures like Himiko, a famous queen of ancient Japan. I found a striking difference between the contents of this book, based on real historical material, and that of the history books written before the war, which had been built around legends surrounding the Japanese Imperial House. I became fascinated with history even though I had had little interest in it when I was young. Reading this small book awakened me to the wonders of history. So I appreciate very much the Church's program that offered various stimuli for progress.

From 1965 to 1966, teaching materials for Relief Society lessons began to appear in the *Seito-No-Michi*. This was very convenient for us. But occasionally they did not appear in the magazine, and we had to prepare the materials ourselves. The Relief Society's study year lasted eight months from October through May, which meant we had no materials to teach from during the remaining four months. We spent those four months doing what was called "work meeting."²

In preparing the manual for work meeting, we had to translate it into English and submit it to the general board for their approval. So I selected and edited portions of old mimeographed manuals that many sisters had

shown lots of interest in. For the visiting teaching messages, we picked up those used during 1957–58; for theology, *Signs of the Times* by Joseph Fielding Smith; for social science, *First Presidency*, which was used from 1957 to 1958. For literature we selected the topic of Japanese poetry and learned its genres and history, reading from classical poetry collections such as *Man-yo-shu* and *Kokin-shu*, along with Haiku and modern poetry. We also studied some Japanese literature. We created a curriculum for work meeting by selecting subject matter from *Mochimono to Kurashikata* (Possessions and Life), published by a commercial press, Fujin-no-tomo. Thus, we needed the understanding and approval of the general board for preparing our own textbooks of literature and work meeting. We asked Sister Takahashi Motoko, a graduate of Brigham Young University, for help. She was one of the members on the mission Relief Society board.

After getting approval from the general presidency, we arranged to print the manuals in time for the start of Relief Society lessons in October. During a hot summer in 1965 in Nagoya, Sister Yaginuma and I managed to find a printing shop that would produce our job at a low price. We asked them to print it quickly, and we proofread the text ourselves. The book was finished on schedule. We used the same manual again in 1972. It was a humble thing with cheap paper and binding, but it was a memorable item for us.

Rapid Growth

In 1968 when he was leaving Japan, Mission President Adney Y. Komatsu said, “To have sufficient growth, we need to divide the mission so that we can have more branches.” Exactly as he said, the mission was divided into two with the arrival of Mission President Edward Y. Okazaki in Osaka one month after Mission President Walter R. Bills took President Komatsu’s post in Tokyo. Residing in Nagoya, I was assigned to serve in Relief Society under President Okazaki and his wife, Chieko, in the Japan-Okinawa Mission. Since we were separated from the Relief Society of the Japan Mission, and having no part in their work, I do not know how they progressed after that. I do know, however, that Church leaders decided to sponsor a Mormon Pavilion at Expo ’70 to be held in Osaka in 1970. We all worked hard in the local units and hoped the Church would experience growth. President Okazaki oversaw our work on the project. Just as we expected, missionary work advanced extensively after Expo ’70. I feel dazzled to see the growth of the Church as missions increased successively to reach ten in 1992, and stakes multiplied to twenty-two by that same year. I sense the rush of the latter days as I witness the rapid increase in the number of temples in the world.

Unrealized Volunteer Work Plan

When the Tokyo Temple was completed in 1980, I was the Relief Society president of the Tokyo North Stake. The construction of the temple proceeded steadily, and the Relief Society was to do the final cleaning, behind the construction crew, before the building was to be opened to the public. Representing seven stake Relief Societies in Tokyo, I was given the responsibility to prepare for the cleaning from Tanaka Kenji, a Regional Representative (fig 3). This involved mobilizing four hundred sisters in five days, dividing them into morning and afternoon groups. While doing the scheduling, we were touched when sisters in remote areas, busy with raising children, willingly volunteered service despite the sacrifice involved.

On the day before the operation, we had a meeting in the temple for preliminary arrangements with Elder McFee from Salt Lake City, the staff of Kajima Construction Co., Regional Representative Tanaka, and the several ward Relief Society presidents. Elder McFee wanted the cleaning done according to the plan, just as the last cleaning of the previous ten temples in other countries had been done. However, the gentlemen from Kajima Construction said that such a cleaning was unnecessary, or rather would bring in dirt with so many people coming in and out. The Kajima representatives assured us they would deliver the temple only after a thorough cleaning. The discussion went on until evening, and finally the plan of volunteer clean up was dropped after Church leaders were satisfied with their inspections. We had to tell the sisters in various districts who were to come the next morning that the plan was cancelled. After 9:30 that night, we used what telephones we could find and quickly communicated this news to ward organizations. It was a night to be remembered because of the fuss. This incident impressed me with how Japanese construction companies handled things compared to those in other countries. At the



Courtesy: Yoshiko, Toshihiko

FIG. 3. Tanaka Kenji (1980) was the Regional Representative during the construction of the Tokyo Temple.

same time, I privately felt the will of God behind it, supposing that sisters who offered service at any cost showed their testimony but were exempted from the sacrifice, just as Abraham of old was commanded to stop the sacrifice of Isaac.

Reminiscences

When I was traveling in America in 1991, I visited the Okazakis; the Andersens; former Mission President Mauss, then ninety-one years old, and his daughter Peggy; and the Andruses. All were in their declining years. Looking back upon the past, I remember how they were once young and energetic, so I worked in good spirit, even though I sometimes worried about problems. I am filled with a strong feeling of gratitude for the Lord's guidance as I remember those dear mission presidents and missionaries who taught us inexperienced members.

I am a witness to the current progress of the Church in Japan, and I am grateful for this. In this year of commemorating the Relief Society's sesquicentennial (1991), I cannot refrain from feeling happy and grateful for the present circumstances of the Relief Society in Japan after forty years of its history. Past events seem vast and obscure, as if in dreams. Now I feel obliged to the next generation for their unceasing service. I should say that we as women are responsible for fulfilling the Relief Society's motto "Charity Never Filleth," and our faith in the Lord leads us to his glory without fail.

Author Yanagida Toshiko lives in Yokohama, Japan, with her husband, Tokichi. She is the mother of two married sons and has seven grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. This article, along with many others, will be published in *Taking the Gospel to the Japanese, 1901-2001*, eds. Reid Nielson and Van C. Gessel (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005).

Translator Numano Jiro teaches English at Hiroshima Kokusai Gakuin University in Hiroshima, Japan, where he lives with his wife, Mitsuko.

1. In 1990, I happened to attend a reunion of missionaries from 1948 to 1954 in Salt Lake City. We were all very delighted to see each other. Sister Andrade (now Sister Clowson), who started the women's meeting, now white-haired, was actively engaged in running the reunion.

2. For a brief explanation of work meeting, also called work day, see Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 296-97.