

## A Day Spent Contemplating the Constitution

— Meeting Beate Sirota Gordon —

New York City, Manhattan. Beate Sirota Gordon’s apartment building stands in a residential neighborhood on the Upper West Side. With a great view, without the ostentation of high-end exclusiveness. To the Japanese, she’s a celebrity in the category of Who’s Who, but here in New York, she’s just another woman, an ordinary citizen. Beate Sirota Gordon: age 84. One of the important figures involved in drafting the Constitution of Japan, where she ended up at the end of World War II as a staff member of GHQ. If such a person is still alive who was involved in the actual making of the Constitution - which hasn’t been revised for over sixty years - I want to hear her story. Out of that sheer desire, I’ve come from Tokyo to visit New York.

April 26, 2007. Our meeting took place at Beate’s apartment. In awe of her ever-so-fluent Japanese and charmed by her humor along the way, I was given an interview that lasted about five hours.

“Welcome! You’ve come all the way from Japan? I am honored. So, please help yourself to the fridge for something to drink. I have sandwiches if you’re hungry. Self-service, though (laugh).”

Such a casual exchange marked the start of my meeting with this great historical figure. Her fame in Japan is due largely to her inclusion of the gender equality clause in the Constitution some sixty years ago, in Article 24. She is, however, by no means a legal expert. Here in the U.S., her fame lends itself more to her achievements as the Director of the Asia Society, where she has promoted the theatrical arts of Asia. Having a renowned pianist for a father must have been an added influence; she is thoroughly learned in the arts and culture. Her apartment is decorated throughout with paintings, photographs, and sculpture, all gifts from the artists who made them.

She became involved in the drafting of the Constitution for a country at the far end of the East after nothing more than a reunion with her parents, who resided in Japan and for whom she returned there to visit after the end of the war. Such a relationship between Beate Sirota Gordon and the Constitution of Japan drew attention only after she visited Japan again in 1993. She’s referred to that visit as the first time she was able to freely discuss this historical narrative. Until then, it remained a top-level national secret – nearly fifty years since the Constitution’s enactment.

Around the time I visited her, the call to adopt Constitutional amendments in Japan grew larger day by day throughout the country. Specifically, the National Referendum Bill (1) was being deliberated by the Diet.

“I think revising the Constitution would be dangerous.”

Her answer was simple. Her concern originates not from her attachment to the Article she had drafted, but from Article 9, which calls for peace.

“Amending the Constitution at this time is like opening Pandora’s Box. If you open that box, what would come out of it? The Constitutional amendment efforts might begin with the purpose of changing some other Articles, wouldn’t they? Perhaps it would stop there with that Article, which would be just fine. But I don’t think it would. Once you open that box, we don’t know what would come out of it. You see, sixty years isn’t as long as it seems. It takes time for a feudal state to become a democratic country. I’ve been married for

about sixty years now but my husband hasn’t changed a bit. I haven’t, either [laughs]. So you see, sixty years really isn’t that long a time. That’s what alarms me.”

The “noble justifications” conjuring the surge of arguments about Constitutional amendments are generally typical: “Over sixty years have passed...” “Now is the time for an independent Constitution, not something imposed upon us by America.” Put simply, underlying this often-heard notion of something “imposed upon us” is the suspicion that “it was made for the victor’s advantage.” Many perceive that an agenda of the victor is summarized in Article 9, which renounces beligerent rights through armament.

“None of us were expecting to draft the Constitution. Even General MacArthur’s orders were for the Japanese government to write it. A few among us were legal experts, but most of us were not. They were university professors, bureaucrats, businessmen...”

A mere nine days were entrusted to her for the urgent task of drafting the Constitution. She said that in search of a library, she hustled around the bombed-out Tokyo landscape in a jeep. Her plan was to collect references to the constitutions of the world’s nations. Those included Germany’s Weimar Constitution, the French Declaration, and even those of the Soviet Union and the Scandinavian nations.

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“憲法”とは何であるかを考えた一日。  
ベアテ・シロタ・ゴードンとの出会い

“We collected Constitutional Articles which were unique in certain countries, and those that had different nuances. We collected them all - the rights of all nations in their best expressed forms. One Japanese expert has said, ‘It appears as though GHQ compiled the wisdom of the world and enshrined it in the Japanese Constitution.’ So I think the wisdom of history is included as if the entire world drafted it together. With regard to Article 9, at the time it said ‘Japan cannot possess armed forces, neither for war nor for self-defense.’ But then Colonel Kades said, ‘This prevents even the right of self-preservation,’ and deleted the word self-defense.”

Colonel Kades. He is not someone the Japanese are particularly familiar with. The only person who appears in Japanese history textbooks is General MacArthur: one foot on the airplane ramp, with a pipe in the corner of his mouth. Major General Whitney, MacArthur’s deputy, bestowed the most trust on Colonel Kades. According to Beate, he is the figure who was administratively integral to the process.

“MacArthur was not only on the same floor as we were, but in the room next door. Even so, he may as well have been the Emperor. The only time I met him was once at a cocktail party, and another day when I was about to board the elevator as he returned from dining and entered the lobby. At that time, I hid from him, actually [laughs]. I was afraid of him, quite so. Even Colonel Kades really spoke with General MacArthur only twice. I was surprised by that as well. It was assumed that he would go meet with him daily. I’ve only become aware of this recently, about four years ago. As far as I understand, Colonel Kades was the key figure of the whole occupation.”

From her description of the events of those times, we get a glimpse into aspects that differ from the impression of occupation as it is described in Japan. Indeed, after the nine days spent drafting the Constitution, she returned to her normal duties and was never again involved with it. For her life as well, it was an unprecedented period of time. Precisely for that reason, her view of the Constitution never departs from that of an ordinary citizen. “Any country needs its Constitution, doesn’t it? Without such call to order, things will fall apart. We would all do as we please [laughs]. However, our Constitution must express what is the greatest good for all. I think the Constitution of every nation would be well served by being amended to include Article 9. I think women have it in their hearts that peace is most important. I don’t know what that would bring about. But we have to make the effort. We must try. You see, Gandhi and many others advocated for peace, but they didn’t succeed. Article 9 might be successful, would it not? It was successful for sixty years, for Japan. That is one example of success. Because of it, for the past sixty years, Japan really didn’t kill anyone.”

She has been invited to Japan as the “Mother of the Constitution” on several occasions in recent years. She reflects upon those times from her own viewpoint, within the boundaries of what she can discuss. Her personality and sense of humor will most certainly change the Japanese perception of, and affinity with, the Constitution. Just as it did for me.

But at times, even she can’t help but cringe at the questions raised by her audience: “How many Americans are familiar with Article 9?” For her, this Constitution isn’t something that belongs only to a country far away. Collected in it are the wisdom of this world, the equal rights sought by men and women, and peace, longed for from the bottom of our hearts. Not by a legal expert, but by one human being.

“Our generation used to truly believe that the end of World War II would bring peace. It was just too hard. ‘We must have learned by now. We aim for peace, and there can’t be any more war.’ But in the past sixty years, we haven’t found peace. Many were killed, again and again. Now in Iraq. And in other countries... If this war goes on, and starts in Iran, I think the world will come to an end. We have to correct it now, do something now, or else this world will see its end in twenty years. I really believe it. I won’t be around by then, most likely. But you will be. My grandchildren will be. And I feel for them. That’s all there is to it.”

No matter who made the Constitution, or when it was made, the question it raises for us living our lives today hasn’t changed. The deep significance of this exhibition, for both the U.S. and Japan, lies right in that question.

(1) Japanese Constitutional Revision National Referendum Bill: Constitutional amendments are initiated by the Diet through a concurring vote of two-thirds or more of all members of the Diet chambers, and enacted following the majority of the concurring vote by the public. The National Referendum Bill stipulates this voting process by the public, and was enacted on May 14, 2007, upon deliberation by the Diet.



Takeshi Ito - Profile

Founder of GENERATION TIMES: a tabloid journal published since 2004 targeting the generation who don’t read newspapers, on the concept of “re-thinking the ways of our times.” After working as an editor for advertising agencies, he became independent in 2000. Ito has written features in articles investigating the Japanese origins through surnames, the family crest, language, and color schemes; reported on the Native American Navaho; and has collaborated with the United Nations World Food Program, with an emphasis on in-depth features projects over newflash-style reporting.  
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