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Beate Sirota Gordon: An American to whom Japan remains indebted ベアテ・シロタ・ゴードン 日本にとっての恩人

Roger Pulvers with a note by Milton Esman

Beate Sirota Gordon passed away on Dec. 30, 2012

In 1946, when Article 24 of the Japanese Constitution was being written — and finding herself to be "the only woman in the room," as she put it with inveterate modesty in her memoir titled in those words — she played a key role in formulating that article which established full rights for women in all matters dealing with marriage and family.

I had the good fortune to correspond with her in 2008 and '09; and in our exchanges, she revealed some personal facts about her upbringing in Japan that shed light on her insight into this country's culture and mores.

Born in Vienna, Beate Sirota was taken to Japan in 1929 by her Jewish parents after her father, Leo, a renowned pianist and music teacher, was invited to teach at what is now the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. (For more about her family and her life during the postwar Allied Occupation of Japan, see Counterpoint of Aug. 17, 2008 here.)

"I did not have a Jewish upbringing," she wrote me. "I had a governess after I was born in Vienna, and she was Catholic, and apparently took me to church unbeknownst to my mother. I do not remember anything about my life in Vienna.

"I left Vienna when I was 5½ years old, and the culture shock I received upon arrival at the Kobe docks was such that it erased all memory of Vienna. I had never seen an Asian before, and the sight of all those Japanese men and women, black-haired and black-eyed, with a different color of skin than mine, caused me to ask my mother whether they were all brothers and sisters. My mother, shocked by this question, became motivated to integrate me into Japanese society."

It didn't take her long to assimilate.

Beate Sirota (left, front) listens to a koto performance with her parents, Augustine and Leo, in November 1929.

"I played with our neighbors' children, visited their homes, learned Japanese games, watched them do homework and practice the koto and the piano, as well as their lessons in flower arrangement and Japanese dance," she recalled. "According to my father, I learned Japanese in three months. ... I was a curiosity for the Japanese. I had dark-brown, very curly hair which I wore short; I wore shorts in the summer, and to many Japanese I looked like a boy — so much so that some newspapers, when writing about my pianist father, illustrated the article with a photo of me that read 'Beate-*san*, Leo Sirota's son.'

"I enjoyed myself thoroughly. The Japanese liked children very much and were very tolerant. They were ready to help in any way they could," she told me.

She also addressed her feelings about being Jewish and how that affected her childhood. "I went to a Lutheran German school in Tokyo's Omori district (of Ota Ward), and although I knew I was Jewish, I didn't know much about it. At that time there were very few Jews in Tokyo. There wasn't even a *minyan* (a quorum of 10 Jewish adults needed to conduct certain religious ceremonies). Of course, there was no synagogue," she noted.

"Being Jewish did not affect me," she said, explaining that, "The Japanese didn't know the difference between one foreigner and another, and in school everything was O.K., until Nazi teachers were sent to the diaspora to teach the Auslandsdeutsche (overseas Germans) about the Third Reich. We had to learn to say 'Heil Hitler.' ... Slowly, I started to learn about discrimination."

Sirota then transferred to an American school in Tokyo, but continued to play with Japanese friends — though some of them were told to be wary of contact with her because she was Jewish. What I gleaned from the correspondence with her was that these early ties with her childhood peers formed in her an affection for Japanese people that lasted a lifetime.

In 1939, Sirota left Japan to attend Mills College, a liberal arts college in Oakland, California. Her parents remained in Japan, where they spent the war years in penury, confined to a house in Karuizawa, Nagano Prefecture.

However, she returned to Tokyo in the winter of 1945 to work as a translator for General Headquarters (GHQ), the central secretariat of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers.

"My father came to Tokyo from Karuizawa to meet me," she wrote to me in 2008. "He looked gaunt and undernourished, and had many wrinkles on his face. My mother did not come because undernourishment had caused her to swell up and she was ill in bed. So I went with my father to Karuizawa.

"It was a tearful but joyful reunion. My parents, having suffered during their village arrest, did not want to stay on in Japan, even though the minister of education himself came to ask him to do so! But my parents did say that during the war years they experienced many kindnesses from their former students, who, although forbidden to do so by the Kempeitai (military police), had brought food and other necessities to them at night."

Sirota somehow had to come to terms, in her own mind, with the brutality that the Japanese had inflicted on millions of people

during the war.

"Naturally," she wrote me, "I was very much disturbed by the atrocities, but I blamed the commanders, not the soldiers. ... My feelings about the war were certainly conflicted. But I knew the Japanese army — I had been living near barracks in Nogizaka (in Minato Ward, central Tokyo), and I had seen soldiers marching with wooden boxes holding the remains of dead comrades, and I had seen the women embroidering scarves with long-life symbols and giving them to soldiers going to war.

"I also knew the strict discipline of the Japanese and how (soldiers) obeyed their superior officers. The soldiers were mostly uneducated men from the countryside. I felt different about the German soldiers, who, I thought, were more sophisticated and worldly and should have known better. Of course, I wanted the U.S. to win against Japan, but I also felt sorry for the ordinary Japanese soldier."

Sirota's role regarding Article 24 of the Constitution is well documented.

> **Article 24 of the Japanese Constitution**
> **Article 24.** Marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual cooperation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis. With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes.

Much is also known of her very active life, after her return to the United States, in the visual and performing arts, promoting a host of Japanese artists on visits there. She married Lt. Joseph Gordon, who she met in Japan, and gave birth to two children. The couple were married for 63 years. Joseph's death preceded Beate's by four months.

Beate Sirota Gordon returned to Japan many times, particularly after her iconic role in women's rights became known.

"The women of Japan," she wrote me, "have done extremely well. They have gone to court; many have been elected not only to the Diet but to local legislatures; they are really peace-loving and ready to fight for peace. They are strong, they persevere ... I am surprised at how far they have come."

For about 30 years after the war, however, she kept an oath of secrecy imposed on her for her role in preparing the Constitution.

Then "the only woman in the room," as she had been at age 22, came out and became a staunch advocate of human rights and — through the Article 9 Association which supports that war-renouncing article in the Constitution — peace.

"We were not allowed to speak to anyone about the Constitution until sometime in the 1970s," she wrote me. "Well, we have accomplished something, right?"

A Note on Beate Sirota's contribution to the Japanese Constitution

Milton Esman

The death of Beata Sirota Gordon at age 88 has been reported by the

New York Times and the *Economist*.

As the last survivor of the team that drafted the current Japanese constitution, I can testify that Beata was indeed responsible for including what became article 24 in the draft constitution, the article that established for Japan "the essential equality of the sexes".

Youthful, attractive, charming, and persistent, insistent that a democratic constitution in the twentieth century must include a statement on women's rights. Beata simply wore down the original disinterest of the middle age American lawyers who dominated the constitution drafting team. These men were not opposed in principle to women's rights. They did not believe, however, that questions of marriage, divorce, property, inheritance, and family framed in violation of basic principles and traditions of Japanese culture, and which are absent from the American constitution, belonged in a Japanese constitution. But finally, overcome by her charm and her persistence, and in order to silence Beata, they agreed to allow this challenge to Japanese culture, the language of article 24, to be incorporated into the draft. In the absence of Beata's pressure, women's rights, including the "equality of the sexes", would not have appeared in the MacArthur constitution.

Her fluency in Japan enabled her in later years to become a much sought after speaker among Japanese feminists who honored her as the author of their emancipation.

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Milton Esman is professor emeritus of Government at Cornell University. As a very young officer, he participated in the drafting of the Japanese constitution. He was especially interested in weakening the entrenched power of the Japanese bureaucracy, a problem that continues to confront Japanese government.