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On the fifth anniversary of March 16, 1958, Soka Gakkai members see off two priests to conduct the first Gohonzon-conferral ceremonies in the United States. One of the priests is Nichiren Shoshu Study Department Leader Shinno Abe, who will later become the 67th high priest, Nikken.

Josei Toda looked Shin'ichi Yamamoto in the eye and said: “When a person takes action as a Buddhist for peace and the happiness of humanity, obstacles and devilish functions inevitably arise. There will also be major persecution.

“But, Shin'ichi, I want you to advance with courage. You must live out your life, daring to call forth persecution. When you take the lead and challenge great difficulties, then, in accord with the principle of consistency from beginning to end, you will open the way to the attainment of Buddhahood in this lifetime not only for yourself but for all who strive with you.

“What's more, a person's real worth is revealed when obstacles arise. It is then that the true nature of each member's faith becomes clear. Cowardly individuals and those seeking to exploit the Soka Gakkai will leave. Difficulties weed out those of false faith and create lions of those who remain. And that's fine.”

Shin'ichi never for a moment forgot these words. He couldn't predict when he would face great persecution or when the storms of oppression would start to rage, but he sensed that they would not be long in coming.

The interference of a veteran member of the ruling political party in his planned meeting with John F. Kennedy was surely one such sign, Shin'ichi thought. Toda had said that, in their efforts to block the further development of the Soka Gakkai, those in power would take aim at the organization's leaders. Shin'ichi was certain that they would use any means at their disposal. He also imagined that they would again, as they had done in the Osaka Incident, conspire to have him arrested on trumped-up charges.

Shin'ichi knew that—even if he were finally proven innocent—if the authorities arrested and prosecuted him as Soka Gakkai president, then had it widely reported by the media, they could firmly establish an image of the Soka Gakkai as dangerous, antisocial and criminal. In this way, the Soka Gakkai would lose credibility in society and be isolated.

Shin'ichi also anticipated that the authorities might call on former Soka Gakkai members and have them fabricate scandals surrounding the organization, making it look as if they were giving the “inside story.” Their strategy would be to use a certain sector of the mass media to spread these false accusations and thereby plant seeds of doubt in members' minds, attempting to destroy the organization's solidarity.

This is a method frequently used to persecute religions. For instance, in order to undermine the reputation and prestige of the Catholic Church, the Nazis concocted and spread scandals about Catholic priests, who enjoyed high respect among the people.

Shin'ichi realized that many forces in society that feared the Soka Gakkai's growth—from political parties to other religious groups and the mass media—would some day pool their energies to attack the organization, tossing aside their differences in ideology or belief in their shared animosity.

Shin'ichi recalled a poem Josei Toda had composed in the predawn hours of July 9, 1956, the day after the House of Councilors elections [in which Soka Gakkai-backed candidates had first run for and been elected to national office].

*As you make your ascent
Of a still steeper mountain,
Set your mind firmly
On the journey for kosen-rufu.*

Shin'ichi clenched his fists. His heart blazed with a fighting spirit at the thought of the difficult road of kosen-rufu that lay ahead.

On March 16, the Tokyo region was visited by light rains, which started in the early morning. The VIP waiting room at the Tokyo International Airport in Haneda overflowed with members who had come to see off two priests who would be traveling to the United States to conduct the first Gohonzon-conferral ceremonies abroad. This trip had been realized at Shin'ichi's request as Soka Gakkai president.

One of the priests was Nichiren Shoshu Study Department Leader Shinno Abe, who would later become the 67th high priest, Nikken.

The two priests would travel together to the United States and split up to follow separate itineraries. They would conduct ceremonies in the cities of Honolulu, Los Angeles, San Diego, Long Beach, Seattle, Chicago, Louisville, Washington, D.C., New Bern, Colorado Springs, Junction City, Abilene, Miami, New York, San Francisco and Sacramento. They would return to Japan two weeks later, on the evening of March 30.

This March 16 marked the fifth anniversary of the momentous ceremony conducted at the head temple in 1958, in which Josei Toda entrusted 6,000 youth with the responsibility of realizing kosen-rufu. The fact that the priests' departure on their very first trip to confer Gohonzon abroad fell on this significant day added to the gathered members' excitement.

Even so, they were somewhat troubled by the drizzle that had begun to fall that morning. It had never rained on any of President Yamamoto's departures to overseas countries, so the bad weather cast a shadow over them.

The farewell began a little before 9:00 a.m. Following remarks by the Nichiren Shoshu general administrator, the Soka Gakkai's representative, General Director Koichi Harayama, gave a speech.

Harayama expressed his joy that the priests' departure fell on March 16, a date that shone brilliantly in the Soka Gakkai's history. And he characterized their trip as a magnificent undertaking that would go down forever in the annals of Nichiren Shoshu.

Daisaku Ikeda appears in the
novel as Shin'ichi Yamamoto.
The events take place in 1963.