

**SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S ESSAY SERIES  
A RECORD OF MY LIFE  
HOKKAIDO: GREAT LAND OF THE NORTH  
BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA**

*The year 2000 has brilliantly dawned.*

My mentor Josei Toda, the second president of the Soka Gakkai, was born in the year 1900, and so this year marks the centennial of his birth. I also celebrated my seventy-second birthday with the arrival of the new year. It is my greatest honor to succeed my mentor and spend each day working for kosen-rufu in good health.

President Toda and his predecessor Tsunesaburo Makiguchi both had profound connections with Hokkaido.<sup>1</sup> It is the land where they each spent their childhood and youth, where their spiritual backbone and foundation of life were forged. If for no other reason than this, Hokkaido has long been a place of my dreams.

I think many people have a place that remains dear to them in their hearts. In my case, it is one corner of a certain town in Hokkaido. My family once had close ties with this town. The story begins with events that took place around the time of my birth on January 2, 1928.

Although I have never been there myself, from various accounts that I have heard and through my own investigations, I have a vivid image of the town etched in my mind, just like a beautiful painting. It is called Shiranuka.

**Shiranuka — Captor of My Imagination**

The city of Kushiro in eastern Hokkaido has a relaxed atmosphere and holds a strong allure for the heart of a traveler. It was once the terminal station of the main train line servicing eastern Hokkaido. Arriving there aboard a train from the western city of Otaru, the famous Japanese poet Takuboku Ishikawa (1886–1912) composed the lines:

*Arriving at the remotest station  
in the light of the snow,  
I make my way  
into the forlorn town.*

In June 1938, President Makiguchi, accompanied by Mr. Toda, visited Kushiro to attend and speak at a conference on education. The arrival in Hokkaido of Mr. Makiguchi, a noted educator from Tokyo, was reported in the *Kushiro Shimibun*, a local newspaper.

In 1963, some twenty-five years later, I visited Kushiro for the first time. I have fond memories of the many wonderful members whom I met there. Heading toward Obihiro from Kushiro on Highway 38, a broad expanse of field opens up to the right, and the vast Pacific Ocean stretches out before one's eyes to the left. The coastal road is glazed white from the spray of the salty waves. Looking out toward the horizon, one can see the silhouettes of distant ships. This was the same ocean that my father had gazed upon as a young man.

About forty minutes by car from Kushiro is Shiranuka, the town that has captured my imagination. Not far from the town, there is an estuary nearly 100 feet wide. This is the Charo River. The name comes from the Ainu<sup>2</sup> word for mouth, referring to the mouth of a river.

Charo is both the name of the river and the surrounding area. Home to salmon in early fall and smelt in the latter part of the season, the Charo is a river teeming with life. Originating in hills

north of Shiranuka that reach a height of nearly 2,000 feet, it is forty-four miles long. The Charo River basin is known as the Charo Plain. The upper Charo once had coal mines and was a center of bustling activity.

My father, Nenokichi, visited Shiranuka many times in an attempt to develop a parcel of land in the Charo Plain. The application to participate in a program to convert the plain to farmland was made in 1919 by the head of the main branch of the Ikeda family. Documents that were filled out then list his address as Oaza-iriyamazu, Iriarai Town, Ebara County, Tokyo.

At the time, the Ikeda family lived in the Iriarai section of present-day Omori in Tokyo, and operated a thriving business harvesting seaweed. Together with his eldest brother, the family head, my father kept the family business up and running. I understand that when the operation was at its peak, there were so many employees that my mother, Ichi, had a hard time providing their board.

My family was one of the first in the area to use motorboats. Crossing Tokyo Bay to Chiba on the opposite side, they would collect seaweed laver spores using broom-like bamboo branches, and then plant the stalks in the seabed off Omori for the spores to grow. Through adopting this method of transplanting seaweed, the Ikeda family business prospered tremendously. This gave them the leeway to invest in cultivating farmland in Hokkaido.

### **Fostered by a Majestic Land**

A law in place at the time enabled the government to transfer ownership of undeveloped land in Hokkaido to people interested in developing it for farming or other commercial purposes. The only restriction was that failure of the proposed enterprise within a fixed period of time would result in forfeiture of the land assignment and all invested funds.

My family's application was granted on January 9, 1922. This was for the acquisition of a parcel of about 90 acres of undeveloped land in an area then designated as Aza-Charo, Oaza-Shiranuka Village, Shiranuka Village, Shiranuka County, Kushiro Province.

The Charo Plain is situated in a large valley surrounded on three sides by hills reaching a height of about 660 feet. The Charo River runs through its center. The entire river basin has an area of about 135 square miles, of which my family had obtained the rights to develop one small parcel.

Charo is a place of great scenic beauty. In 1910, the noted Japanese author Roka Tokutomi (1868–1927) rode the train from Asahikawa to Kushiro, a line that had only opened three years prior. Disembarking at Shiranuka Station, he took an excursion to the Charo River. This is the same route that my father took on his trips from Tokyo to Shiranuka.

From the top of the modest hills surrounding the town, one can behold the beautiful sea sparkling in the soft northern sunlight. I imagine that this ocean view must have weighed heavily in the Ikeda family's selection of this particular locale for cultivation, given their long history in seaweed production. As the family's representative, my father began making regular trips to the parcel of land, where he could hear the roar of waves crashing in the sea below. It was located just over half a mile north of Shiranuka Station.

Hokkaido has captivated the hearts of many. It was a true frontier. And it is the majestic land that fostered the progressive dispositions and noble spirits of both President Makiguchi and President Toda.

As a young man, Mr. Makiguchi ran errands for an office in Otaru. He always had a book in hand and used every spare moment he had to read. This earned him the nickname of "the studier." Thanks to the support of a patron who recognized his diligence, Mr. Makiguchi was able to attend the Hokkaido Normal School, where he later became a teacher. It was through

frank and open discussion and research with colleagues in the field of geography that he came to develop the ideas for his work *Geography of Human Life*. The young frontier land of Hokkaido had an atmosphere that fostered people of genuine character and ability, and that was conducive to the free exchange of ideas.

Mr. Toda, likewise, struggled and persevered and paid his way through school, eventually becoming an assistant teacher. Throughout his life, he remained straightforward and open-minded. I believe this can be attributed not only to his inherent nature, but to the vast, all-embracing land of Hokkaido in which he was raised.

### **Son of a Seaweed Harvester**

My father also must have been charmed by this magnificent land. Although seaweed farming is extremely arduous and time-consuming, the summers are relatively free, so it was during that season that my father would make the trip to Charo. In summer, the land in the area, though still soaked from the thawing snows of late spring, was at last dry enough to receive visitors.

The inn in front of the station kept several horses that it loaned out. Travelers wearing straw sandals on their bare feet borrowed these horses to go out and inspect the land, which was so muddy that it could not be traveled upon except by horse. Shiranuka was known as a horse-breeding district, and there was a training center for military horses nearby. In fact, Shiranuka Station was an important point for the shipment of war horses.

Unfortunately, my family's venture in land development did not proceed according to plan. The ground, which remained moist year-round, was dotted with clusters of sedge, interfering with its ability to be converted to farmland. To make matters worse, the seaweed operation in Tokyo was dealt a serious blow by the Tokyo Earthquake of 1923. As a result, the family could no longer spare either the requisite help or resources to develop the land. With the failure of the cultivation enterprise, the land assignment was revoked. The notice of revocation was dated January 12, 1928, just days after I was born. Notification was made by certified mail at the end of the month.

Hypothetically speaking, if the land development endeavor had gone smoothly, members of the Ikeda family would most likely have relocated to Shiranuka, which means that I could have been born there. And if the family seaweed business had proceeded successfully, they would have probably put increased energy into the development venture. If, on the other hand, the family business had failed completely, the Ikedas might have uprooted and moved to Hokkaido altogether to make a new start. Either way, my family's destiny would have been completely different than what it was.

My father was known as "Mr. Obstinate"; once he had decided on some course of action, he would not waver in the least. For my father, whose rheumatism made it difficult for him to get around like he once could, the memory of inspecting the family's plot of land by horseback rekindled a pioneering spirit in his heart. I recall being a young boy and listening to my father, who was a quiet man, speak fondly of those days in Hokkaido. "I rode a good horse," he would say. "That horse and I would ride along the one road that stretched across the plain. Ah, and then there was the sea...."

Even after my father's health deteriorated, my family, with my mother at the head, continued harvesting seaweed on a greatly reduced scale in Omori, Tokyo, which was known as a production center for a type of seaweed called asakusanori. Days for a seaweed farmer start early. I particularly recall having to scoop the seaweed from the bamboo sticks by hand on cold winter mornings. I did what I could, but because of my weak constitution, the freezing seawater chilled me to the bone. During the winter months, my mother's hands were always red with chilblains.

I am but the son of a seaweed farmer. I regard such humble origins as a tremendous source of pride. My parents continued to raise me with great love and care, even through the ordeal of downsizing the once prosperous family business. I think that growing up in honest poverty is what led me to ponder what it means to lead a life of true value. Because we had so many struggles, I earnestly sought meaning in life.

### **My Encounter with President Toda**

I believe it is because of my modest beginnings and the hardships I experienced in my youth that I was able to meet my mentor Josei Toda. I am deeply appreciative of the circumstances in which I was brought up, and I can't help but feel that there was something extremely mystic in our fateful encounter.

Mr. Toda poured his life into raising me, a piece of raw ore. Through his training, I was able to set course on the correct path in life that is kosen-rufu.

I met Mr. Toda for the first time on August 14, 1947.<sup>3</sup> It was a Thursday evening, and I remember that it had been a brilliantly clear day.

Two years and four months later, I began working at his publishing company. When the business went under, I continued working without a salary. Unable to afford a coat, I went through the winter wearing an open-necked summer shirt. This is now a treasured memory. At the time, Mr. Toda had become completely isolated. I alone stood by his side and protected him. Things were so intense that I even lost track of the passing seasons.

Once the crisis was resolved, Mr. Toda was inaugurated as the second Soka Gakkai president on May 3, 1951. He later suggested the one-year anniversary of his appointment for my wedding day. When the date was set, Mr. Toda took the trouble of visiting my father at his home in Kojiya to seek his approval on my behalf. At Mr. Toda's sincere request to be entrusted with my wellbeing, my father readily agreed. I will never forget how happy and at ease my father looked in his traditional crested kimono at my wedding reception.

My father passed away on December 10, 1956. That night, I stayed at my family's home for the first time in many years. At Mr. Toda's urging, many people came to the house to offer their condolences and pray for my father's repose.

Throughout his life, my father was a model of integrity, carrying himself with composure as he pursued his dream of cultivating land in Hokkaido, and then as he weathered the hardships that followed when the venture fell through. In death, he seemed to smile with satisfaction.

I vividly recall the crackling sound of the fire burning in the garden on the evening of his funeral.

### **Shiranuka Village Today**

So what happened to the land of my family's dreams? I understand that a road, which is now Highway 392, was paved along the west side of the parcel. Along the highway, one finds various shops and service stations.

It takes about an hour to stroll through the surrounding area, which is lined with simple but elegant homes, and apartments managed by the town. It has the feel of a quiet new residential community. A large plywood manufacturing plant is in operation on the east side of the parcel, serving as a reminder that lumber is one of Shiranuka's principal industries.

Raw lumber was once floated down the Charo River. Not far from the river is a forest belonging to Kyoto University. I have heard that although the area has changed dramatically, it retains a beauty typical of Hokkaido.

With the Shiranuka Community Center as their base, our fellow members in the two Soka

Gakkai chapters in the area, Shiranuka and Nishi-Shoro, are expanding wide circles of trust and friendship in their communities. Nothing could make me happier.

Incidentally, this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of Shiranuka's incorporation as a town.

### **The Deceased Live On in Our Convictions**

April is a month of spring in full bloom. With the arrival of the fragrant season of cherry blossoms, my thoughts always turn to the death of my mentor. And when I think of my mentor, I inevitably think of his hometown of Atsuta Village in Hokkaido. I will never forget the day I accompanied him to Atsuta for the first time.

With the memory of Mr. Toda coming alive in the blooming cherry blossoms each passing spring, each passing year, I have continued to renew the vow I made as his disciple. It is my greatest joy to report that last month (December 1999) President Toda's hometown of Atsuta named him an honorary citizen of the village to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth. [President Ikeda was made an honorary citizen of the village in 1977.]

The thirty-third memorial service for Mr. Toda was held on April 2, 1990.<sup>4</sup> As human beings, it is important and only natural that we remember the deceased on the anniversary of their passing. And of even greater importance, I feel, is the spirit to firmly and deeply carry on the will of one's mentor.

Historically, performing memorial services at certain prescribed intervals was not part of Buddhism. A prominent scholar of religion comments on this as follows:

“It is not surprising that Japanese Buddhism is characterized as ceremonial religion or funeral Buddhism. Priests claim that by reciting the sutra, performing the last rites and writing the deceased's posthumous name on a special wooden tablet at the funeral, they enable the deceased to attain Buddhahood. They also say that if you have a priest come and recite the sutra on the seventh day following a person's death, and then on the subsequent designated anniversaries, the deceased will absolutely attain Buddhahood. But isn't that strange? Doesn't that contradict their statement that by performing the last rites at the funeral they have enabled the person to become a Buddha? Just how many times does a person need to become a Buddha?”

It's exactly as he says. His words are simple logic.

One of the two characters making up the word for memorial service in Japanese has the meaning of “detest.” This comes from the traditional Japanese belief that the deceased are somehow defiled, and helps explain the folk custom of deifying the deceased lest they should bring a curse upon the living.

But the departed are not to be feared and detested. Rather, they should be appreciated and loved. For they live on in our hearts, reproaching or encouraging us when we grow lazy and need it.

The deceased live on in our convictions. President Makiguchi, who died in prison upholding his beliefs, solemnly lives on in the SGI's advance for world peace. The deceased live on in the convictions that we inherit from them. President Toda is alive in the hearts of all the like-minded friends who have “emerged from the earth”—friends challenging their obstacles through faith. Each day we are living together—no, struggling together—with President Makiguchi and President Toda.

### **Battling Injustice Is the Greatest Offering We Can Make to the Deceased**

In his writings, Nichiren Daishonin tells the young Nanjo Tokimitsu: “If that becomes true [you are protected by the Buddhist gods], there are powerful people who will be alarmed and try to put a stop to it. And there are sure to be more great persecutions. At that time, you should

strengthen your determination and your faith even more, confident that your prayers will now surely be realized. Then your late father will become a Buddha, and will fly to your aid” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1512).

He strongly encourages Tokimitsu to fight for justice no matter what persecution may befall him, and that so doing will lead to his father’s attainment of Buddhahood. I want to engrave in my heart this teaching of the Daishonin that battling evil and injustice is the ultimate offering we can make for the eternal happiness of the deceased.

The Daishonin further says that Tokimitsu’s efforts will bring him the protection and support of his father. In our struggles as SGI members, we always have President Makiguchi and President Toda at our side.

### **“Never Let Up in the Struggle against Evil”**

Looking back now, I see that President Toda’s thirty-third memorial service had truly profound significance. It was from around that time that negative forces began conspiring against the Soka Gakkai. Behind the cover of the religious authority of Nichiren Shoshu, they launched a full-fledged attempt to obstruct the flow of the worldwide spread of the Daishonin’s teachings.

But the Soka Gakkai, upholding the spirit of the lion king as expounded by the Daishonin, resolutely drove back this attack of the three powerful enemies. Rising up to achieve a Buddhist renaissance, we have begun to fulfill our mission of establishing a world religion based on humanism. This is in accord with Mr. Toda’s final guidance to “never let up in the struggle against evil.”

The number *thirty-three* is also significant in that it is the number of forms that the Lotus Sutra says Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds assumes in order to lead as many people as possible to happiness. Today, these multiple forms are none other than the countless noble members of the SGI who are taking action in their respective fields of endeavor, in accord with the Buddhist principles of “cherry, peach, plum and damson blossoms”<sup>5</sup> and “propagating the Law according to one’s ability.” Aren’t their efforts to go to those who are sad and suffering and help them overcome their difficulties in exact accord with the actions of Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds?

### **“Thousand Comrades of Hachioji”**

Hachioji, where the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall is located, was once home to a group of samurai known as the “Thousand Comrades of Hachioji.” This was a group of samurai who were given land to cultivate in exchange for their willingness to defend the capital of Edo (present-day Tokyo) should the need arise.

History shows that in 1799, about 100 of these comrades petitioned the central authorities for permission to resettle as farmer-samurai in Hokkaido, and that they took up residence there the following year. After considering such factors as strategic location for defensive purposes, suitability for farming and climate, fifty of them chose Shiranuka as the place for their settlement.

To this day, Hachioji and Shiranuka continue to engage in friendship exchanges.

### **A Spiritual Dialogue of Life**

At the forefront of the movement to create a peaceful world based on the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin are untold comrades who, while exerting themselves wholeheartedly to fulfill their various responsibilities, are ready to stand up and fight at the crucial moment with the same spirit as their mentor. They are the pride of the SGI, and are doubtless receiving the sincere praise of President Makiguchi and President Toda.

I have continuously advanced through good times and bad with President Toda's "lion's roar" alive in my heart. It is because I have maintained this spiritual dialogue with my mentor that I have been able to achieve what I have today.

At the time of President Toda's thirty-third memorial, I composed two poems that I presented to youth division representatives:

*On the momentous occasion  
Of the 33rd memorial  
Of our mentor's passing —  
Never forget the pride  
Of living as disciples.*

*The significant memorial  
Resounds with our mentor's call  
To avenge the betrayal of our cause.  
Never for a moment  
Forget your mission.*

1. Hokkaido: The northernmost and second largest of Japan's four main islands.
2. Ainu: An indigenous people of the Japanese islands. About 24,000 people in Hokkaido identify themselves as Ainu today.
3. Mr. Ikeda attended a Soka Gakkai discussion meeting in Tokyo's Ota Ward at the invitation of a former elementary-school classmate.
4. In Western reckoning, this would be the 32nd anniversary of Mr. Toda's death.
5. Buddhist principle of "cherry, peach, plum and damson blossoms": Expounds the unique diversity and beauty of all living entities.