

Haramoto Tomio, photographer, designer, philanthropist

(Kobe, 1957-1959)

One day in 1957, I read an article in *The Japan Times* about Haramoto Tomio, who, while a literature student at Kobe University, had launched “Juen Shishu”, a 20-page “Ten Yen Anthology of Poems.” It was a very modest venture, started by four young people: a welder, a typist and two students, with Haramoto as the driving force. The poems, in free verse, were written by ordinary Japanese—labourers, fishermen, office workers, children. Some of the poets were physically handicapped.

To provide a forum for amateur poets outside the clubby world of haiku and tanka societies was in itself unusual at the time. What made it even more so was its focus on working people and those marginalized by incurable illness or physical disability. Haramoto and his friends wanted to bring some cheer into the dreary lives of day labourers and lowly nurses, and in the stunted existence of TB sufferers confined in sanatoriums and patients in lepers’ homes. For the blind, Haramoto invented a new, inexpensive method of multiplying a Braille manuscript to fit the modest budget, thus launching, according to the *Mainichi Newspaper*, the first regular Braille magazine in Japan.

To appreciate the significance of Haramoto’s move it helps to know that at the time the disabled were generally shunned in Japan and effectively kept from public view. The now ubiquitous public facilities for the handicapped, such as lifts that could accommodate wheelchairs, street markings and traffic chimes, were non-existent. Blind persons without family support were reduced to earning a living as masseurs or, if they had the necessary talent and training, musical accompanists on the *koto* or *samisen*. As late as the 1970s a lawyer friend of mine told me that he had to take out a bank loan to build a wide, covered corridor around his modest house so that his wheelchair-bound spastic son could enjoy free movement without having to go out into the street, where he “would be ignored or stared at.”



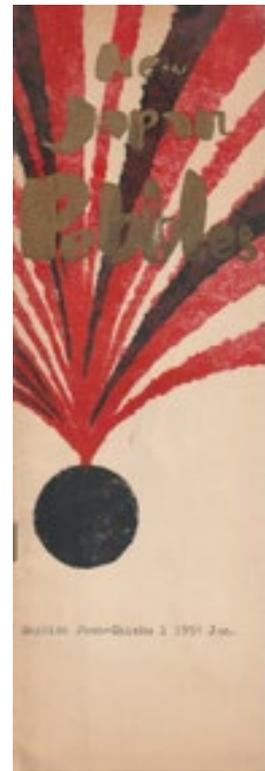
I was impressed by Haramoto’s warm-hearted project, and decided to make a small donation. This led to a personal meeting and, before I knew it, I was drafted to produce an English edition of the magazine, which was realized with the help of Kinya Teraoka, a colleague at

the bank where I worked. We called the magazine *New Japan Pebbles*, inspired by the following poem, originally written in Braille by Ohnishi, a blind 14-year old schoolboy:

By the Mountain Stream...

*Notes of birds are dying away
Into the rustle of the bamboos
And the mountain stream*

*I grope for a small, sharp pebble
And throw it as far as I can
Shu-shu-shu it says
As it skims over the water
Cutting the waves with all its might
I won't be beaten by that stone
From here I will follow the riverbank...*



The local papers duly reported the birth of the English edition, which went on sale at major bookstores. It was well received, but the market for it proved too small, and we ceased publication after the 7th issue.



These young men gratefully received the first monetary donation from E. H. Bruckmann (left), assistant manager, Osaka branch, National Mandchurian, to the publishers of the Japanese-language monthly "The Anthology of Poems" last Saturday. The three youths are among the 20 men and women who compose, edit and publish the brochure of poems.

Meanwhile, Haramoto's activities continued. Poems were received from all over the country, from truck drivers and university professors and housewives.

A two-page report in the mass-circulation Sunday Mainichi drew over a hundred letters. Given the magazine's tiny price (perhaps roughly equivalent to Yen 100 or US\$1 today) there wasn't much they could do in money terms for the unfortunate. Even when monthly sales through bookstores and cafés reached 4000 copies, the magazine continued losing money with every issue, and the editors had to meet the shortfall from their own pockets and what donations they could find.

But Haramoto and his friends were convinced their venture was worth the effort. They believed that writing and reading poems was a source of comfort to those suffering from loneliness, poverty or worse. The Braille version was especially cherished. "You know," Haramoto told me, "some of the blind lepers who have lost their hands read the



poems with their tongue...” They also found other ways to bring cheer among their readers. For example, with the help of an amateur orchestra they organised a concert for over 500 blind and handicapped children, to which I contributed financially. I also escorted ten of the children from Kyoto to the Kobe venue.

Haramoto designed and executed all the attractive artwork for the magazine, and also launched a line of greeting cards and silk prints to raise additional revenue. The success of his posters made him go international, not with a commercial venture but with a highly unusual offer. He had read that Dr. Albert Schweitzer’s hospital in Lambaréné, Gabon, had bare walls, and decided to do something about that. He created and printed 30 large pictures of colourful, traditional Japanese design, and wrote Dr. Schweitzer to announce his intention.

The 86-year old physician-philosopher and Nobel Prize winner wrote back without delay, in German, to express his profound thanks, but regretted that “any artwork on the walls of this tropical hospital would fall victim to humidity and insects.” In his handwritten letter dated December 5, 1960, he asked Haramoto to “ship the pictures instead to my house in Gunsbach, France, where I can see them on my next visit.” Haramoto was disappointed, but complied with Dr. Schweitzer’s request.



Haramoto was a man of many passions. Photography and steam locomotives were among them. He combined the two when in the winter of 1970-71 he travelled alone to Hokkaido to witness and photograph the last journeys of the C62 series of heavy steam-powered locomotives, nicknamed “Niseko”. Trudging through deep snow, which in places was man-high, Haramoto captured the timeless spirit of this greatest workhorse of man’s invention. The photo book, written, designed and published by him, and carrying detailed captions of every photograph, came out in September 1971. Many of the photos are dramatic, showing two engines pulling long trains through the harsh mountain landscape, across bridges and down valleys, and braving blizzards. “This book is dedicated to the retiring ‘Niseko’ workhorse,” Haramoto wrote in his book.

Tomio Haramoto stood out because he persisted in doing what he believed in. At a time when few dared to do so. Juen Shishu was just one of his many accomplishments.

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