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Making Sense of My Father's Life and Language Traumas

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I ask students who enter my seminar on Asians' English language identities to tell about themselves on a Google Form I have prepared, and also write their English language histories. Language learning histories serve as not only recounts by learners but also as potential for learners and teachers to construct knowledge together (Mercer 2013). My interest in having students recount their personal history with English language learning comes not so much from a pedagogical approach but more with my nascent interest in history. In a recent conversation with one student, I was surprised to learn that she was born in the United States, and had gone abroad several times. Needless to say, she didn't provide this information in the Google Form or in her language history. She expressed surprise that I didn't know this before.

How is it that students don't share details that instructors would deem essential to understand them? I think these omissions go beyond a lack of vocabulary. As I ponder, I wonder if a similar sort of thinking might have been at work, when I think about experiences of my father, a Japanese immigrant to the United States. I have regarded his life as one extended struggle to be recognized as a person with legitimate status and voice, one which connects his identity in relation to time and location and volition. I must admit that I have no particular theory in mind as I write this, but I wish to situate his experiences which at times intertwined with mine to leave residues that I liken to reactions to trauma, defined as "Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes their sense of self and their ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences" (Onderko, 2020).

What official documentation there was with my father did not capture who he really was. His name on his American passport was "Mike Ikeda," but that was not his original name. His occupation was written on tax forms as "gardener," but he made his living not raising plants but mowing lawns. When I requested from my father's hometown village office in Japan the *koseki touhon* (戸籍謄本) which is a document that lists details of family members' births, deaths, and marital statuses (Nelan 2017) in order to verify my Japanese ancestry, it revealed his citizenship was still Japanese (his name was not crossed out). This showed my father had never informed the local authorities that he had become a naturalized United States citizen.

Initially, I knew my father Shizuo was born in Takagi Village in the southern part of Nagano Prefecture in 1927 and from the age of four his family moved to the Japanese-occupied area in northeastern China known as Manchukuo (Manchuria). His mother died there, and his junior high school days ended when he was drafted into the Japanese army during World War 2. After the war, his family was able to flee back to Japan, but he was left behind in a Soviet war camp, from which later he broke out and made it to Japan before immigrating to the United States. He had a fondness for WW2 movies, *The Great Escape* being one of them. For many years, we had no idea why, other than the actor Steve McQueen looked cool on a motorcycle. When we asked dad about his WW2

experiences, he'd quickly change the topic and tell us to go to bed. It was only decades later, when he watched *Daichi no Ko* (大地の子) which was a TV mini-series originally broadcasted on NHK (1995), about a Japanese boy left behind in China, did my father start to open up on his past.

His Japanese army unit was captured en masse by the Soviets on the last day of the war. The camp where he was incarcerated was designed to starve everyone to death. He told me that he and other inmates would fight for scraps of food. He fled in an organized escape but the prisoners found few places to hide. He said that they sought refuge in a swamp, but the Russian soldiers bayoneted each victim and killed on the spot those who screamed. He was stabbed in the thigh but kept silent and motionless. His nails bore the marks of frostbite. During his period as a fugitive, he joined the Chinese Red Army which was engaged in a civil war with the Nationalists and left after a battle to board a ship destined for Japan.

(That's what he told me. My wife told me that he went down the Korean peninsula.) The family registry kept at the municipal office where my father was born showed he had an older brother and an older sister, but to others he told he had others in his family, one who died in infancy, and another who was killed in the South Pacific. Why did my father change his story to suit his listeners? Why did he not try to rectify his facts? I suspect it may be because his wife, my mother, failed to show much interest. When I and my wife arranged a trip for my father in his last years to visit his childhood haunts in Manchuria, he told me she never wanted to visit there. Perhaps she sensed that asking about it would bring out his trauma. Although I regret not asking how his mother passed away, I just couldn't bear the thought of making him relive such memories.

According to my brother, our father spent seven years in Hashima City in Gifu Prefecture where his family had relocated. One day, he spotted in a newspaper that Japanese who had been in war-torn areas were eligible to immigrate to the United States. His account matches the conditions for young male refugees known as *nanmin seinen* (難民青年) (Minamikawa p. 34) who repatriated from Manchuria and Korea and could be accepted under the conditions set by the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 signed into action by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Thanks to documentation provided by his father who had training as a notary, he was able to enter the United States through Angel Island in San Francisco. He spent several seasons in the San Joaquin Valley picking strawberries and being a short order cook in the offseason. Then he was taken to Los Angeles by a Japanese Christian evangelist, where he met my mother who came from a nearby village in Nagano Prefecture as a picture bride in a marriage agreement. Despite a near ten-year gap in ages between them, my mother was deemed the most suitable one for my father because of her prowess in English, it being her favorite subject in high school.

My father coming to America seemed overly anxious that his name would be too difficult for the immigration officers to understand when he arrived there, which explains why his original passport read as "Mike Ikeda." Only later when he received his naturalization papers did he include a middle initial S to stand for his Japanese name. I met a man with the same surname whose name was Michael and he asked if my dad's real name was the same. No, just Mike. American-born Japanese men would have shortened their names to Shiz. I have no idea why my father selected that name to be his. In time, "Mike" fit my dad's simple tastes befitting a blue-collar man, one who seemed interested only in beef, beer, action movies, and local sports teams.

The defining moment between my parents and I was when I was seven years old (Ikeda and Shiba 2020:37). My elementary school teacher became concerned that I was mixing my English with my parents' language too much. She held a parent-teacher conference and told them that I was in danger of failing the second-grade (this is what my mother told me). The teacher ordered them to stop speaking the heritage language at home so that I could concentrate on English. My language conundrum was solved in a matter of time. But the damage was done.

I quickly lost my ability to speak in the Japanese language, a shocking development which persuaded my parents to enroll me in a Japanese-language school on Saturday mornings. Besides that I was no longer

able to watch the cartoons that were on TV at the time, I viewed my schooling as largely futile because I didn't become fluent in the language until I came to Japan. Another fallout from that parent-teacher conference was that my conversations with my parents were halved, to those only with my mother. I suspect my mother's great respect for teachers persuaded her to tell my father not to use their native language again. My father stopped speaking to me altogether. The possible rationale for the drastic decision my parents made can be summed up in one phrase: "*kodomo no tame*" ("for the children"). The silence between my father and I deepened over the years. I joked with my classmates that my father Shizuo lived up to his name as a quiet person. One friend I invited to my home saw my dad mowing our front lawn and asked me if it was worthwhile to greet him. I must have said no. But my father did not forgive the slight. He told me I could never bring that friend to our place again.

If my father and I talked, our utterances to each other were likely monosyllabic. One episode that lingers was when *natto* was served at my family meals. I resisted eating it because of its smell and texture. My father finally could take no more of my resistance and pointed at me, exclaiming, "Oh my son!" I was scared at his outburst and began eating it. When I started teaching in Japan, I recounted this episode to teachers of English humorously. But one of them asked me how was it possible that my father knew how to change the exclamation from "Oh my god" if he did not have a facility with the English language. I realized I had misheard my father. Likely he had said, "*Omae-san!*" which goes beyond simply "You!" to include a sense of frustration.

Only after my mother passed away did my wife persuade me to talk to my dad. I initially resisted, saying he should take the first step and that my Japanese language/Nihongo was too bad for him to understand. But she insisted I do so because he looked so lonely. I guess he and I stomached our hesitations and the ensuing talks we had made up for all the years of silence. My dad would tell me that I reminded him so much of his wife, my mother. But the tragedy remains that my mom never heard these conversations during her lifetime.

My father was a man of his generation and no doubt his near-death experiences shaped how he regarded life. He was a survivor and pragmatic; possessions mattered almost nothing to him. An episode illustrates his attitude. After it was decided that my father would move out of our family home and live with my brother, he asked me to put my most cherished stuff in a box that I would take back to Japan. But while I was out with friends, he threw the box in a dumpster. When I found out what he had done, he then asked me if I wanted to keep my remaining belongings. I think Marie Kondo's methods of keeping what is cherished would be no comparison to his approach. Another episode was when I stayed at my grandmother's, my aunt showed me a photo of my dad when he was four years old. I was excited, because I had never seen any featuring him as a child. When I told my dad, he asked me to do him a favor: steal the photo and bring it back to him. I was shocked and asked where he would keep it. No, he would burn it. Needless to say, I did not oblige him.

In his last years, he was obsessed with renewing his driver's license. But the city where he lived didn't have a Japanese version. Because he couldn't read English well enough, he was constantly failing the paper test. He told me that one test examiner remembered him coming often to the driver's license testing site, and after yet another fail, ushered him into a room. He was given a test form with the answers marked on it and told to remember them. After some time, he was given a test and it was the same one. We can't imagine that this can happen in our society, but this may demonstrate that where there is a way, compassion can happen.

I noted how my father kept in his room a healthy interest in prewar Manchuria shown in countless videotapes and books. I suggested the idea of going there, which he quickly waved away given his age (over eighty years old) and failing health. But I persisted, and in August 2010, my brother arranged to take my father to Japan, where I and my wife escorted him to where he had

spent his childhood in northeast China for a privately arranged few days' trip. I was surprised how vigorous he became, casting aside his cane and strolling around the premises with confidence. His eyes lit up as he recounted his surroundings and we rode a train that he said was on the same route as in the 1930s. Afterwards, I asked him what he would remember the most, and he said, it was the evening sun there. True to his survivalist urges, upon his return to his room back in the U.S., he discarded all of his memorabilia. When I met him again, he pointed to his head, saying everything he needed to remember was in there.

In my father's last years, he often wondered aloud if his life had been worthwhile. I and my siblings would always tell him that he had raised three robust children who carry on his legacy.

Besides the fact that I am glad to have written these reflections about my father, I feel I have come to entertain a more open perspective as to why students may not reveal all that is expected. I should wait for their revelations in their own time. Hopefully others will be inspired to share their recollections of their parents or loved ones who might have struggled with expressing themselves in an acquired language. I close this with a proverb in English created by a Japanese high school student, "Learn to care before you glare." May we regard and treat others around us with consideration in our teaching.

Special Thanks

I express my great thanks to my siblings for refreshing my memories.

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