

Little Tokyo is Where I Want To Be

By KENSHO FURUYA

I can vividly remember my mother grocery shopping at Ida Market in Little Tokyo. I remember the smelly *tsukemono* in the wooden tubs facing the street. I remember eating at the Far East Cafe for what seemed like every occasion—receptions for weddings, funerals, birthdays and anniversaries.

In those days, I recall two Chinese restaurants besides the Far East Cafe in Little Tokyo. There was Lem's and San Kwo Low.

And I vividly remember looking forward to the *chambara* (*samurai*) movies at the Linda Lea Theater (on Main Street between First and Second



streets) every Saturday afternoon, with an almost religious fervor. The Linda Lea featured Toei movies during the golden age of the chambara in the early 1960s. There was also the Kinema in Little Tokyo, which featured Shochiku films; the Nippon Gekijo on First Street in East L.A., which featured Daiei films; the Kokusai (Daiei and Shochiku films) on Crenshaw and the Kabuki on Adams, both in the *Seinan* area (too far for my grandma to drive); as well as the Toho La Brea (Toho films) on La Brea near Wilshire.

I fondly remember Mr. & Mrs. Kato of the Linda Lea who always brought my grandma, grandpa and me tiny cups of grape soda on a lacquer Japanese tray right in the middle of the movie! In those days, a bag of fresh popcorn was 10 cents. I got into movies for free until I was 16 years old. And there was Mr. Tsukada of Tsukada Shokai and Bunka-Do who always had a good supply of toy samurai swords for me to inspect. And Wataru-san of Oriental Gifts who always had real samurai swords on his wall which I would spend the whole afternoon looking at in awe, dreaming of the day when I could own one myself.

In those days, Little Tokyo fueled my love of everything Japanese. One might argue that running up and down First Street and in and out of the Japanese gift stores is hardly "high culture" and not a proper introduction to

what is Japanese. But, for me, a very naive 10-year-old, it was all there was and I enjoyed those days very much.

At that time, we Japanese Americans looked at Little Tokyo as our "community" and "cultural" center. And it was the center of almost all cultural events in the Japanese American community.

These were the days before the Nishi Hongwanji Temple moved to its present location on First and Vignes streets; when events, now held at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center and Japanese American National Museum, were held at the old Nishi or in the main hall of the Koyasan Temple in the middle of J-Town.

I hope many Sansei like myself will recall these days before the *yagura* tower of the Japanese Village Plaza became a sort of symbol of Little Tokyo and the L.A. City Hall was the most prominent, tallest building in our downtown skyline.

Those days are now just a distant memory.

Little Tokyo has certainly changed in the last 30 years—some not so good—but mostly for the good, I believe. I never thought one could ever buy such things as Gucci bags and Hermes scarfs and other expensive Italian goods in J-Town, but that is how times change.

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greet me at the airport so I felt very lonely, totally drained, exhausted, though I had lost about 10 pounds. I called a cab and it was about an hour's ride to my father's house.

Upon arrival at his home, I said, "Papa, I have something for you." I immediately cut the honeydew melon. My 86-year-old father ate it with a smile saying, "Mmm, how good and sweet it is." He hadn't tasted a stateside melon in 40 years. He owned a grocery store when he lived in Seattle 40 years ago so he knew his melons. It was one of his favorite fruits. That was my last gift to my father. He passed away two years later.

Michiko "Mickey" (Murayama) Washlow was born in Seattle and moved to Tokyo with her family while in high school. She returned to Seattle in 1949, married in Chicago in 1950 and moved to California in 1960.

Rev. George Aki, a former 442nd RCT chaplain, officiated at her wedding, and again at her husband's funeral in California in 1992.

This piece was written in 1974 while she was living in San Gabriel. She currently lives in La Verne. ■

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I have loved martial arts ever since I could walk. I only remember *kendo* and then *aikido*, which were virtually unknown art forms in those days. My early dream was to become a samurai like in the *chambara* movies. As I grew up, I decided to become a so-called "master" in martial arts and even made it to Japan to undergo some of the harshest training—and treatment—I have ever had to endure.

I have trained, taught and traveled all over the country. About 12 years ago, I finally decided to move my old *dojo* to establish a more permanent aikido school. Many of my students strongly urged me to open in Santa Monica or West Los Angeles because of the more "yuppie," higher-income orientation of these areas, but I picked Little Tokyo as home for my *dojo*.

Few of my students understood this at the time. But somehow, deep, unknown, undefined feelings, down inside of me said, "Little Tokyo. Little Tokyo is where I want to be."

Even today, people tell me it was not a good choice, arguing, "No residential area nearby, failing economy, high crime, in a dirty alley, no walk-by traffic and, in the first place, no one can even find your school. You have essentially done everything wrong!"

"Yes, I know. But I still like Little Tokyo." Even today, it's a struggle to pay the rent and bills. And, yes, students still can't find my *dojo*. Little Tokyo is suffering from the downturn in the economy, and the "perception" of high crime scares people away.

Where are all these hotels and shopping centers which were planned for Little Tokyo about 10 years ago? Why are there so many parking lots?

With the slow progress of the *dojo*, I found I had plenty of time on my hands and tried to pursue other Japanese arts, but despite this, the *dojo* was still a "full-time" job. As in the days of old, I live in the *dojo* and teach seven days a week. Feeding, supporting and teaching my students is more costly than the dues I receive. Fundamentally, the *dojo* is a financial bust, but it is the *dojo* I long dreamed of and I am so proud of my students and how they are progressing.

After the early death of my parents, I became a student of the Bishop Yamashita of Zenshuji where I have had a long-time interest in *zazen* and Buddhism. I remember, one day he told me, "The *dojo* is not designed to make money. If you are poor, there is nothing wrong with living poorly."

My Zen master expressed the courage of the Issei that I remember as a child from my grandparents. I am always strengthened by his words.

Part of living in Little Tokyo involves making Little Tokyo a better place to live. I try to do a little—whatever I can and I greatly admire the Sansei, and others as well, who work hard at the JACCC and JANM. And people like Brian Kito, who is a driving force behind the Greater Little Tokyo Anti-Crime Association, and many others like him.

In my early days of training in aikido, people pursuing their art stayed in their own group and created their own little world. Aikido people stayed in the aikido world; Japanese dance, the Japanese dance world; tea ceremony, the tea ceremony world and so on. We only came out for Nisei Week, *Obon* and *kenjinkai* picnics, it seemed.

Being in Little Tokyo and trying to define aikido as a cultural fine art and part of the Japanese heritage, I have found, as a Sansei, there is a greater realization of—or perhaps need for—a sense of political or social activism within the community. I have never felt this before.

Somehow, I feel the *dojo* survives and thrives only as Little Tokyo, the community, thrives.

It is a new Little Tokyo I live and teach in. It is not the Little Tokyo of my childhood days. And as I long for the "good ol' days," I hope the "good ol' days" will become something "new" we can look forward to in the future.

As I continue my work teaching aikido, I see that in some tiny way we are defining something that may eventually become a new form of Japanese culture strongly embodying the traditional but clearly influenced

and redefined by the Sansei generation in America. We see it already in many of the traditional Japanese arts today in our community.

I am known in the martial arts and aikido as a hard-core traditionalist. In teaching both American, Japanese and Japanese American students, there are two aspects of the arts which must be preserved and exposed.

Definitely, we need to preserve and cultivate the traditional art form passed down to us from our teachers, whether they are the Issei of this country or our teachers in Japan. Even Japan is changing, for better or worse, in the world of the traditional arts—and re-creating, or perhaps, transforming these disciplines from the experiences of and in the direction for Sansei today.

There has been a transition made from the Issei to the Nisei generation but this appears to have occurred more by attrition than any clearly defined means. The transition of leadership, or whatever you want to call it, from the Nisei to the Sansei is more difficult because the Japanese American society we are dealing with today is more diffuse and broad. This diffusion gives our heritage greater strength, but, at the same time, creates a more complex environment for growth.

In my tiny *dojo*, I strongly try to preserve the traditional form of aikido and Japanese martial arts as "culture" as opposed to "chop-socky" movies, full contact competition and big business martial arts chains.

Yet, as I am in constant contact with my Sansei generation and living in Little Tokyo, I see another aspect of Japanese "culture" which needs to be stimulated, cultivated and nurtured and that is the traditional "Japanese American" culture which is now in its very important formative stages.

Where, when or if these will come together, I really don't know. Yet, as we enter a new millennium, these are some things to think about.

Every time I walk through Little Tokyo, shops like *Fugetsu-Do* seem to be the only remnants of the old days. The new eventually becomes old. But somehow we need to think about the transformation of the new culture and generation from the old days back to the good ol' days again.

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