

At Home with a Friend: The Story of Sara Couch and Tomegawa Jun

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Sara Couch and Tomegawa Jun were teachers, evangelists, housemates and friends. Their friendship prospered for more than forty-five years, in spite of the closing of their school, the chaos surrounding World War Two, and the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. In death, as in life, they remain together, interred beneath a single tombstone on a hillside overlooking this seaport town.

While contrived international romances such as “Madame Butterfly” and “Madame Chrysanthemum” continue to shape the image of Nagasaki, a tale of true friendship that endured nearly half a century between two women—one American and the other Japanese—has been virtually ignored. Tourists may search in vain for the Nagasaki of Puccini and Loti, but the world of Sara Couch and Tomegawa Jun is everywhere visible. The house they shared still stands in all its magnificence at Nishiyama near Suwa Shrine; Nagasaki Kyokai, the church they served, continues to hold services every Sunday tucked away next to the Koshihyo Confucian Shrine; and the main school building of Tozan Gakuin, one of the few surviving structures of the former Reformed Church mission complex at Higashiyamate where they taught, rests peacefully in its new found home at Glover Garden.

Sara M. Couch was born in the upstate New York town of Schoharie on January 10, 1867. After graduating from Albany State Normal School in 1888, she worked as an elementary school teacher in the public school system at Mechanicville, New York until 1891. She then spent a year at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago preparing for missionary service. The Reformed Church in America dispatched her to Nagasaki in 1892 with the understanding that she would conduct evangelical work in the area. These plans, however, were soon altered.

The twenty-five-year old Couch arrived in Nagasaki on October 22, 1892 to discover that the head teacher at Sturges Seminary (Umegasaki Jo Gakko), the Reformed Church girls’ school that had opened five years earlier in Nagasaki, had died suddenly the previous month. This necessitated that Couch abandon her evangelical plans and assume charge of Sturges. At the time of her arrival, there were fifty-one students at the school, eleven of whom were Christians. Two years later under Couch’s direction there were fifty-eight girls at Sturges, thirty of whom were Christian.

An additional missionary was assigned to Sturges Seminary in 1895, in order that Couch could prepare for her evangelistic work. Couch was not long at her work, however, when conditions once again necessitated her recall to Sturges to teach. From 1898 until the removal of Sturges from Nagasaki in 1914, Couch performed the dual roles of teacher and touring evangelist.

In July 1899 Sara Couch embarked on her initial furlough to the United States where she stayed a year. While she was in America, a twelve-year-old student named Tomegawa Jun entered Sturges Seminary. Jun was the second daughter of Rev. Tomegawa Ichiro and his wife Ume. Ichiro was an early disciple of the Rev. Henry Stout, the long-time head of the Reformed Church mission in Nagasaki. Ume was also a Christian, having graduated from Ferris Seminary in Yokohama and served as an assistant to Mrs. Stout before her marriage to Ichiro.

Tomegawa Jun was born in Nagasaki on December 13, 1884, but travelled extensively as a child due to her father’s work at various Christian missions in northern Kyushu. Tragedy struck the family early, as Ume passed away when Jun was two and her only sister died a year later. Ichiro

later remarried and Jun became part of a family of seven brothers and sisters, but life remained difficult because of the constant illness of her step-mother.

Tomegawa Jun began school in Kurume and finished her primary education in Saga. She was forced to stay home and work for a year after this; finally entering Sturges in September 1899. In spite of difficulties at home that precluded Jun from returning to school on time after summer vacation each year, she managed to graduate from Sturges in the spring of 1903.

From Sturges Tomegawa Jun went to Joshi Gakuin, a Presbyterian girls' school in Tokyo, with the financial support of the Reformed Church. In March 1905 she graduated, and the following month returned to Nagasaki to teach the Bible, Home Economics and History at Sturges Seminary. She also added the duties of dormitory matron in 1907. In spite of her original reluctance to take on the added burden, she agreed to do it because of her affection for Couch, the Assistant Principal, whom Jun later admitted she "learned to love as a mother."

Although offered the opportunity to go to the United States to attend college or Bible School, Tomegawa chose to remain in Nagasaki and teach at Sturges. Except for the year missed by Couch during her second furlough to America in 1907, the two taught at Sturges until the school was transferred to Shimonoseki in 1914 in a cost-cutting measure that merged it with a Presbyterian girls' school from Yamaguchi. The Sturges buildings at Higashiyamate were sold to Kwassui, a neighboring Methodist mission school for girls.

At the time of the removal of the school to Shimonoseki, both Couch and Tomegawa decided not to join the larger new school (still referred to as Sturges Seminary in English, but called Baiko Jo Gakuin in Japanese), but to remain behind and perform evangelical work to small groups of women in Nagasaki. Tomegawa also had an offer to become General Secretary of the Tokyo-based Woman's Board of Missions of the Church of Christ in Japan, but declined because it would have taken her away from Nagasaki.

Instead, Tomegawa Jun and Sara Couch concentrated their efforts on evangelizing and publishing a Japanese-language newspaper for women in the Nagasaki area. The eight-page monthly newspaper, entitled Ochibo (Harvest Gleanings), debuted in October 1914 and ran until February 1942 when it was forced to shut down because of World War Two. By the end of the first year, the newspaper had over 800 subscribers. Although originally intended primarily for women, Ochibo also achieved a wide following among men.

The newspaper continued to be published even during the absence of Tomegawa and Couch on leave to the United States from July 1916 to October 1917. Upon their return to Nagasaki, the number of subscribers once again began to grow, and by 1921 there were more than a thousand. The popularity of the newspaper led to an invitation for Tomegawa to visit Taiwan on a two-month speaking tour. By 1922 there were subscribers throughout Japan as well as abroad in countries stretching from India to the United States.

By this time, the newspaper had achieved a profit, and the proceeds were being contributed to a building fund for a new church in Nagasaki. The new structure for Nagasaki Kyokai was built on the site of the old Public Hall in Oura and dedicated in October 1925. It included a second-floor room over the entrance specially designed for use by the Women's Society of the church.

Soon after the dedication of the church building, Tomegawa went to America on a self-devised sab-

batical year. Upon returning to Nagasaki, her duties revolved around editing Ochibo, evangelizing, and conducting Bible classes for women. She also had various responsibilities at Nagasaki Kyokai, including teaching Sunday School, playing the organ, serving as elder, and heading the Women's Society.

After living together for years in a Western-style building at Higashiyamate, Sara Couch and Tomegawa Jun bought a three-story, sixteen-room Japanese house at no. 96 Kami Nishiyama in 1928. Here they continued to publish Ochibo and headquarter their evangelical work throughout the 1930s.

In 1941, as relations between Japan and the United States deteriorated, the situation for Sara Couch became anxious. By the summer of that year, the U.S. Consul and all American missionaries, except Couch, had evacuated Nagasaki. According to a Board of Foreign Missions report, Couch chose to stay with her friends in Nagasaki because she felt more at home there than in the United States.

On the morning of December 8, 1941, in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Sara Couch was arrested at her Nishiyama home by a local policeman and taken to Maria Gakuen, a Catholic girls' school across town. Tomegawa Jun, in the company of two friends, visited Couch the next morning at the school. In the beginning, Jun was allowed to visit daily to bring food and supplies, but eventually was restricted to one visit a week.

Couch was detained at Maria Gakuen for a year before being transferred to Tokyo in December 1942. Prior to the departure from Nagasaki, Japanese authorities allowed her to return to her home for a few days to prepare for the trip. In addition, Tomegawa was permitted to accompany Couch to her new detention center at a French girls' school in Tokyo. Over the course of the war, Tomegawa managed to travel to Tokyo two or three additional times to visit her friend.

Sara Couch, despite her advanced years (she was almost seventy-six at the time of her transfer to Tokyo), not only survived internment, but served as an inspiration to others in the camp. Lois Kramer of the Evangelical Mission in Tokyo who was confined with Couch, remarked in a September 1945 letter upon their release that "[Couch] has been such a blessing to us in our internment camp in Tokyo ever since she came to us from Nagasaki in December 1942."

The camp was destroyed by American fire bombings on May 25, 1945, and although Couch lost most of her personal belongings, she managed to escape injury. She was then moved with the other prisoners to Seibo Hospital and Convent until the end of the war in August.

Peace came at last, but at a terrible price to the American missionary who four years earlier had stayed behind in Japan rather than return to the United States. Her beloved Nagasaki had been devastated by an atomic bomb, and she had no idea as to the condition of her friend Tomegawa Jun. The ship repatriating the camp internees to San Francisco was set to depart, but Couch refused to sail without information concerning Tomegawa. In a September 1, 1945 letter to an old Nagasaki acquaintance, Luman Shafer, who was at that time the Secretary for China and Japan of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church in America, Couch noted that "I may return later if [Tomegawa] and all friends there are gone!"

In an effort to examine first hand the condition of Tomegawa Jun and other friends in Nagasaki, Sara Couch arranged for transportation to the city—arriving by train on September 13. What she saw coming into town horrified her, as she passed through Urakami and the heart of the atomic

destruction. By the time the train pulled into the center of Nagasaki, however, she was able to breathe a small sigh of relief; she could see that the mountain between her home and Urakami had protected her neighborhood from the most severe damage. In an ironic twist of fate, she was escorted from the train station to her home by the same policeman who four years earlier had taken her away to the detention center—his behavior on this occasion reflecting much more humility than the first time they had met.

Sara Couch's unannounced arrival at her Nishiyama residence ended considerable trepidation on the part of the two long-time evangelists; Couch wondering if Tomegawa had survived the atomic bombing, and Tomegawa speculating as to whether the seventy-eight-year old Couch had been able to endure four years of internment and the Tokyo air raids. Uncertainty and fear were soon replaced by reassurance and joy, as Sara Couch was finally home again with friends in Nagasaki.

The years of internment had taken their toll, however, and Sara Couch's health soon broke down. After a short illness, she died of pneumonia at her home on January 27, 1946 at the age of seventy-nine. Her funeral service was conducted in an upstairsroom of her home by Tomegawa Jun. Among those in attendance was a young minister named Aoyama Takeo, who was so impressed by Couch's sacrifice for the youth of Japan that he too decided to dedicate his life to the education of Japanese youth. Aoyama later became the founder and president of The Nagasaki Junior College of Foreign Languages.

Sara Couch was buried not in the International Cemetery at Sakamoto where most foreigners were laid to rest, but across town in the Nagasaki Kyokai section of the Nakagawa Go (Narutaki) Cemetery situated above the Nagasaki Prefectural Junior College for Women. The following year Tomegawa Jun erected a tombstone over the grave, proclaiming herself a disciple left behind by Miss Couch. Tomegawa continued to live at the Nishiyama home and work for Christian causes in Nagasaki until her death on February 15, 1974 at the age of eighty-nine. She was buried alongside Sara Couch, and her name was added to the tombstone that she had erected twenty-seven years earlier for her teacher and friend.

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