

Life at the Bottom of the Hill: A Jewish-Japanese Family in the Nagasaki Foreign Settlement

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Most of the information available on life in the foreign settlement at Nagasaki focuses on the British and American communities situated on the Bund and the two residential hills overlooking the harbor. Much less is known about the disparate gathering of men and women who operated the backstreet service establishments of Oura and Umegasaki and the taverns and inns along Sagarimatsu Creek. Well represented among this group were Jewish merchants who had wandered to Nagasaki from Russia and Eastern Europe.

One of the leaders of the early Jewish community in town was Rubin Haskell Goldenberg, a native of Galatz, Rumania who came to Nagasaki in the mid-1870s and operated a series of successful taverns and inns. Goldenberg and his Japanese wife Kita raised three children in their second-story residence above the “Flag of All Nations” tavern at no. 42 Sagarimatsu—just south of Benten-bashi and at the foot of Minamiyamate, the hill where many of the wealthy British merchants resided. Although financially secure, members of the Goldenberg family faced social discrimination from the predominantly British and American foreign community on two counts: not only was Haskell Goldenberg Jewish, but he had married the Japanese mother of his children. The Goldenbergs persevered, however, and eventually found success in both Japan and the United States. What follows is a brief account of this unique Jewish-Japanese family.

Little is known of Haskell Goldenberg’s early life, except that he was born in Galatz, Bessarabia in 1839. Bessarabia belonged to Russia until in the aftermath of the Crimean War of 1854-55, Russia was forced to cede the territory to the newly created country of Rumania. Forcibly conscripted into the Russian army, he was later ordered to Siberia. With a group of others confronting similar circumstances, he deserted the army and walked to the Sea of Japan, where he caught a ride on a fishing boat headed to Tsingchow. Here he was given protection and granted a German passport, in part because of the large German population in his home province.

Hearing that there were economic opportunities in Japan, Goldenberg sailed to Nagasaki as a German national and became involved in the tavern industry that catered primarily to the foreign sailors who flocked to the port. For two decades from the mid-1870s, he operated a series of taverns and inns (usually a combination of the two) in Umegasaki and along Sagarimatsu Creek. Names of the establishments he ran over the years included Garibaldi Inn, Britannia Hotel, City of Hamburg, Snugger Inn, Prince of Wales Inn, Shamrock Inn, Commercial Inn, and Travellers Inn.

Goldenberg and fellow merchant Samuel Goldman were the leaders of the Jewish community in Nagasaki. They were later joined by the Lessner and Ginsberg (Mess) families, who would become the richest foreign merchants in town by the close of the foreign settlement in 1899.

By the mid-1880s, Haskell Goldenberg was living with a Japanese women from neighboring Obama named Ide Kita. This relationship produced a daughter, Lena (1888), and two sons, Arthur (1889) and Jacob (1891). In October 1894 Haskell and Kita legalized their relationship through a marriage ceremony. Liaisons between Western men and Japanese women were common at the time, but marriages were not. The ceremony of Haskell and Kita was the first (and probably only) recorded marriage in Nagasaki between a Jew and a Japanese during the foreign settlement period.

With the profits from his business, Goldenberg became the primary contributor to the construction of Nagasaki Beth Israel Synagogue at no. 11 Umegasaki in September 1896. Kita worked at the synagogue and raised the two boys according to the laws of Judaism. Years later Arthur Goldenberg related what life was like in the household with Kita.

”[She]...sacrificed everything for us boys and became an ardent convert in Judaism. Wholeheartedly she espoused the religion....Ardently she learned the art of Jewish cookery, so that her boys can carry on their father’s tradition and heritage. She kept a strict Kosher house and observed all ancient Hebrew rituals.”

On November 7, 1898, after a brief illness, Haskell Goldenberg passed away at his residence at no. 42 Sagarimatsu at the age of fifty-nine. Kita was left with three young children of mixed blood and German nationality, as well as a family business to operate. From all accounts, she did an admirable job in both areas. The business thrived, while the boys attended Kaisei (a French Catholic school in town) and Lena was sent to a mission boarding school in Shanghai, where she converted to Catholicism.

While there was enough money to live comfortably, the children faced considerable prejudice from their Western European and American neighbors, and life became increasingly difficult for them. As Arthur Goldenberg later reflected:

”They held us up in high disgust, flaunted us contemptuously and regarded us with scorn and disdain. Every day we kids had to be on our toes. Not accepted by the better class nations, looked down upon by our own white neighbors, we were outcasts....Injustice I was cognizant of. Envy no! not a bit because of the luxurious life led by the elite neighbors who sent their children to private schools. I watched their swimming pools, their lawn parties, their beautiful garden settings and activities of their yacht and tennis club functions, etc.”

After working for the influential Jewish merchant S.D. Lessner for two years, Arthur Goldenberg decided that the only way to receive a good education and just treatment would be to leave Nagasaki. In 1904, with Lessner’s adopted son Percy as his traveling companion, he left his family behind in search of a better life in Europe. Leaving his mother was particularly difficult, but something he knew must be done.

”With heavy laden heart, she kissed me good bye as I sailed out of that beautiful harbor. A dream fulfilled. Stoically mother faced the grim and important destiny.”

Arthur and Percy sailed westward to Marseilles and then on to Berlin, where they worked as apprentices in an export company—a job arranged by Percy’s father. After a few years in Berlin, Arthur managed to track down a cousin in Fall River, Massachusetts who invited him to America. There he changed his family name to Gelden and worked as a sign painter for four dollars a week.

Five years later Arthur moved to the midwest and arranged for his younger brother Jacob to join him. Jacob worked as a part-time barber in order to support his studies at Valparaiso University in Indiana.

While the two young immigrants were successfully pursuing new lives in the American midwest, their mother and sister were adjusting to different circumstances back in Nagasaki. Around 1900

Kita had married a Japanese man named Yoshiki Tadakimi, by whom she had a son, Tadamasa. Lena (also known by her Japanese name Rie) married a Japanese Christian, Sakurai Manabu, in 1913. With financial assistance from Kita, Arthur and Jacob returned to Japan for their sister's wedding. This would prove to be the final visit back to their native town for both young men.

Upon returning to the United States, Arthur worked as a painter and Jacob (who by this time had changed his name to Jack Golden) continued his studies, this time at the University of Michigan. Both married soon after; Jack in 1914 to Laura Goldberg of Milwaukee and Arthur in 1916 to Hannah Taylor of Chicago. Jack and Laura had three children (Lorraine, 1916; Lucille, 1918; and Gayle, 1920), as did Arthur and Hannah (Jane, 1916; Robert, 1918; and Ruth, 1921). Upon graduation in 1917, Jack worked as a dentist in Michigan; Arthur was a successful industrial painting contractor in the Chicago area.

Back in Japan, their sister Lena and her husband Manabu had four children (Joji, Emiko, Susumu and Makoto) between 1915 and 1920. In the latter year, they moved to Dairen, Manchuria, where Manabu was a high government official with the Japanese communication industry. The Sakurai family remained in Manchuria until 1933, when it moved to Tokyo and lived in a large residence built with funds primarily obtained from Haskell Goldenberg's legacy. Kita also moved to Tokyo with her husband and son. She lived there until her death in 1936.

World War Two brought with it a number of complications for the Goldenberg children, especially for the two sons living in the United States. With her impeccable manners and fluent Japanese, Lena Sakurai blended easily into Japanese society, and few knew of her foreign heritage. Luckily for her family, daughter Emiko had returned from America in 1940 from a three-year visit as a Y.W.C.A. member. For Jack and Arthur, the fact that their father held a German passport and their mother was Japanese, made life extremely difficult.

One of Jack Golden's daughters recalls her father burning all traces of his family background on December 7, 1941 upon hearing of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Fifty-three years removed this may seem a little drastic, but the family home was in Detroit, Michigan, the same city where only a few years ago Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was mistaken for a Japanese and beaten to death by two unemployed auto workers.

Not only the beginning of the war, but its conclusion brought difficulties. One of Arthur Golden's daughters was married to a soldier in the U.S. Armed Forces who was stationed in Okinawa and set to invade the Japanese mainland when the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki ending the war. While the soldier felt the bomb had probably saved his life, his wife also envisioned the horror of the atomic destruction of her father's birthplace.

The Goldenberg children (Arthur Golden, Jack Golden and Lena Sakurai) were reunited for a brief time after the war in Hawaii in 1955. Four years later, however, Jack died. Arthur passed away in 1976 and Lena followed in 1980. Their half-brother Tadamasa, who was the director of a research center for Nissan Motors in Japan, died in 1972.

Both Lena and Tadamasa had children who maintained ties with the United States. Lena's daughter Emiko decided to become a physician in 1947. It was around this time that she met an American doctor in Japan named Ira Hirschy. After completing her medical training in Japan in 1952, she went to Chicago where she completed her internship in pediatrics. She then moved to Hawaii where

she established a practice as a pediatrician and married Dr. Hirschy in 1959. Emiko died of cancer in 1979 and her remains were taken back to Tokyo for burial in the Sakurai family plot at Fuchu Catholic Cemetery.

Tadamasa's son Hajime (born 1931) went to Princeton to study in 1955, and later taught in Heidelberg, Germany before going to work for the National Laboratory for High Energy Physics in Tsukuba, Japan. At present, he is professor emeritus at the National laboratory and professor of physics at Ibaraki University.

In 1974 three of Haskell and Kita Goldenberg's grandchildren traveled to Japan to see family members in Tokyo and to visit their grandfather's grave in Nagasaki. In preparation for their departure, Arthur Gelden supplied a seven-page letter of his recollections of Nagasaki. The boy who had left Nagasaki seventy years earlier in search of a better life, was now an eighty-six-year-old man. He wanted his daughter and nieces to look for the remnants of the Jewish community he had left behind so many years earlier. Specifically, he wanted to know what happened to the synagogue and its congregation. "I am counting on you girls to unlock the human mysteries surrounding the disappearance of the Jews."

Little did he know, however, that political (the Russo-Japanese War, World War One and the Russian Revolution) and economic (the Great Depression) developments had forced the Jewish community to move on other East Asian ports, such as Shanghai and Yokohama. What his relatives found at the site of the synagogue was a noodle shop and a few neighbors with hazy recollections of the building and the people who had formerly occupied it. In the Jewish section of Sakamoto International Cemetery they found their grandfather's tombstone, but little else to remind them of the community that Arthur Gelden had so vividly described.

The three women could, however, stand at the mouth of Sagarimatsu Creek and watch the ships come and go from Nagasaki harbor as the young boy had done decades earlier. Arthur recalled how at dusk he would often sit on the stone steps of the wharf at Sagarimatsu, where he "just dreamed and pondered away, deploring with most poignant hope that my future was not lined with a rainbow of promise...."

They could also look up at the remnants of the old European and American settlements of Higashiyamate and Minamiyamate. Within the hilltop mansions that symbolized the snobbery of the rich echoed the words of Arthur Gelden.

The so-called 'white elites' lived up on the hillsides. Many of their pretentious homes are identified in the guide book as Alt's house, Glover house, Ringer house, etc. Each side street from [Sagarimatsu] creek was avoided by the haughty, class minded snobs because of the stench emanating at low tide from the exposed murky river bottom.

Thousands of Japanese and foreign tourists visit Nagasaki each year and enjoy the magnificent houses of Glover's Garden on Minamiyamate, but few realize that this was only part of the story of the foreign settlement. Forgotten are those who lived at the bottom of the hill amidst the stench of Sagarimatsu Creek and the foreign bar district.

Before feeling too sorry for the Goldenberg's, however, one should remember that this is primarily a story of the family's successful search for freedom and happiness. Haskell Goldenberg escaped forced conscription in the Russian army to find tranquility and a loving family in Nagasaki. After

Haskell's death, his wife Kita remarried and lived a long, happy and prosperous life. The two Goldenberg boys, Arthur and Jacob, left the squalor of Sagarimatsu and the disdain of class conscious foreign settlers in an attempt to fulfill the dreams they had envisioned on the steps of the wharf at Nagasaki Harbor. Through hard work and determination, they realized their aspirations in the distant American midwest. Daughter Lena became a Catholic, married a man who would become an important Japanese government official, and lived to the ripe old age of ninety-two. Kita's son Tadamasa became a successful executive with Nissan Motors. Today the grandchildren and great grandchildren of Haskell and Kita Goldenberg are scattered throughout Japan and the United States, proud of the achievements born out of difficult circumstances over a century ago in Nagasaki.

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