

## The Families

### Chapter 1

#### Yokota Family

“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away.” Job 1:21

On November 15, 1977, a thirteen-year-old girl from Japan mysteriously disappeared. Twenty years later, she was found to have been abducted by North Korea.

On February 3, 1997, the story that junior high school student Megumi Yokota was abducted from Niigata by North Korea was widely reported in the media. The issue was taken up in the Japanese Diet at the same time, receiving a great deal of attention from the public all at once.

A month later, the public attention led the family members of the victims abducted by North Korea to form the Association of the Families of the Victims Abducted by North Korea (the Abductee Family Association) on March 25, 1997. For the first time, the families of the victims united.

Five and a half years later after the Abductee Family Association was organized, on September 17, 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to North Korea brought to light the shocking information that, among the thirteen Japanese abductees acknowledged by North Korea, there were “five alive, eight dead.”

A husband and a wife, Shigeru Yokota and Sakie Yokota, would never forget the stormy days in recent years and the day that had started everything.

On January 21, 1997, Sakie was out to attend a monthly prayer meeting at a Christian church in Chiba. Shigeru had retired from the Bank of Japan five years ago. That day, when he was watching TV in his condominium in Kawasaki city, he received a phone call around noon.

The call was from the alumni association of the Bank of Japan, Kyuyukai. The person on the phone told Shigeru that a Diet member, Atsushi Hashimoto of the Japanese Communist Party, had called to find out Shigeru’s contact information. Since he was not supposed to give out Shigeru’s home phone number, he told Mr. Hashimoto that he would tell Mr. Shigeru Yokota to call him directly. The person said that Shigeru should call a secretary, Mr. Tatsukichi Hyomoto.

Although Shigeru was confused, he dialed the number that he learned from the person from the alumni association right away. Mr. Hyomoto answered and said, “I have information that your daughter is alive in North Korea.”

Shigeru was surprised. Since his daughter, Megumi, had disappeared twenty years ago, there had been no clues about her disappearance. The secretary said he had been investigating cases that seemed to be caused by North Korean abductors,

such as the three cases (Hasuike and Okudo, Chimura and Hamamoto, and Ichikawa and Masumoto) in each of which a couple disappeared. Mr. Hyomoto had just heard about Megumi's story and asked Shigeru to tell him about the circumstances of his daughter's case in detail at the Members Building of the House of Councilors. Shigeru left home right away. He had never been to the Members Building before. He was told to get off at Nagata-cho station on the subway and go to the first in the line of three identical buildings. Shigeru followed Mr. Hyomoto's detailed directions.

'Megumi was alive!,' Shigeru thought. He was filled with joy. However, anxiety gradually filled Shigeru's mind while riding on the train on the Keihin-Tohoku Line on his way to the center of Tokyo from the Kawasaki Station. 'Is it really true? Even if it's true, she may not be able to come home from North Korea.' But this was the first information about November 15, 1977 that seemed useful. He had never had any clue about the cause of Megumi's disappearance before.

There had been only two cases that he thought may have been related to Megumi's case for longer than at least one moment.

First, about two months after her disappearance, there was a phone call demanding a ransom for Megumi. 'I am holding Megumi-san here with me,' said the man on the phone. Sakie, who answered the phone, was shocked, and her legs started trembling with fear. However, at the same time, Sakie thought she finally found the reason why Megumi disappeared and had some hope that she would find out where her daughter was. But, at last, it was found to be a prank call by a lonely high school student. The police who rushed to the Yokotas' home traced the call and arrested the suspect. It was a made-up story based on newspaper articles. That was a cruel blow to Sakie, who had been suffering with grief since her daughter disappeared.

Second, there was a disappearance of a girl in Sanjo city, Niigata, which happened in November 1990. The suspect was arrested 9 years after the girl disappeared. The girl had been confined in a room on the second floor of his house in Kashiwazaki city. This case drew a great deal of attention from the public. This case was the only one that shared the most similarities to Megumi's case. Both happened in Niigata. Both of the girls disappeared on their way home from school. Their ages were close. Megumi was 13 years old, and the girl in Sanjo city was 10 years old when she disappeared. Moreover, the days on which they disappeared differed by two days, November 15th and November 13th. Even though the case in Sanjo city happened more than 10 years after Megumi's disappearance, similar to Megumi's case, there had been no clues about the girl's disappearance even after 5 to 6 years. Shigeru wondered if the two cases were caused by the same criminal. 'Maybe the guy who had kidnapped Megumi fetched a new girl.' Shigeru hoped to get any information about Megumi's case from the abductor's other crime through

his arrest. Shigeru, who is the type to think about everything critically, analyzed the case in this way. But Shigeru's expectation for such limited possibility indicated that there were no other ways to find the whereabouts of his daughter. So many years passed by without any clues.

But even that case was found to have nothing to do with Megumi in the end. The news that Megumi was in North Korea came to Shigeru before the criminal in Sanjo city was arrested.

When Shigeru arrived at the Members Building, Mr. Hyomoto showed him a copy of the Niigata Nippo newspaper and a copy of an article from a magazine, Modern Korea. The newspaper article was about the events of Megumi's disappearance, which were familiar to Shigeru. However, the story in the magazine article was new to him. He thought that if the story was true, it must be about Megumi. The magazine article stated:

'I am writing this article, hoping that someone will give me any information after reading this article. This 'case' is quite grim and cruel.

The victim is a child.

The fact was disclosed in late 1994 by one of the North Korean spies who exiled himself to South Korea. According to his account, the incident happened probably in 1976, one or two years before the couples were abducted one after another from shores of Japan. A thirteen-year-old girl was abducted from a Japanese shore to North Korea. The ex-spy did not know where the shore was. The girl was on her way home after her badminton lesson in school. The North Korean abductors, who were about to escape from the shore, were witnessed by the girl, so they caught her and took her back to their country.

The girl was smart and studied hard because she was told that they would take her back to her mother's place when she mastered the Korean language. When she turned around 18, she realized she would not be able to go back home, and she became mentally ill. When she was hospitalized, the ex-spy learned about her case. The girl was said to be a sister of a twin. This is all I know about the 'girl's abduction.'

The magazine article was written by Kenji Ishidaka, a reporter from Asahi Broadcasting in Osaka. Mr. Ishidaka obtained the story when he met a high official in a South Korean intelligence agency for an interview. The high official said he had recently heard the story from a spy who had exiled himself from North Korea. Mr. Ishidaka wrote the story for the magazine specializing in Korean issues, Modern Korea. The story ran in the November 1996 issue of the magazine.

When he was writing the story, the fact that the girl was Megumi Yokota was not known at all. Because Mr. Ishidaka worked in the broadcasting station in Osaka, he did not have much chance of knowing about the case of a junior high school girl's disappearance, which happened almost twenty years earlier and was reported only by local newspapers in Niigata. Even the spy, who had the information, did not know the girl's name and the location of the shore in Japan. The spy heard the story from another spy.

This "girl's abduction" was linked with "Megumi Yokota," after this series of events.

Mr. Katsumi Sato was the director of Modern Korea Research Institute, which published Modern Korea. Mr. Sato happened to have a public talk in Niigata in December 1996, a month after the magazine including the article on the girl's abduction was published. In the meeting following his public talk, he mentioned Ishidaka's article in his magazine. "If I remember right, there was a case in which a girl disappeared in Niigata a long time ago, wasn't there?" Mr. Sato from Niigata said, recalling his dim memory. Someone listening to him on the side shouted "That's about Megumi-chan! She was alive!" The person was a high-ranking officer of the Niigata Prefectural Police who had attended the public talk.

The next year, this information reached Mr. Hyomoto, who had been investigating abduction issues all over the country. Mr. Hyomoto was looking through newspapers published around the time of Megumi's disappearance. He found out that her father had worked for the Bank of Japan, and he called the bank on the same day. But, Shigeru had already retired. The call was transferred to the bank's alumni association, and the alumni association called the Yokotas' home and told him to call the secretary, Mr. Hyomoto.

There were two differences between the information in Ishidaka's report and the facts about Megumi's case. His report said the incident happened in 1976 although Megumi's case happened in 1977. The report said the girl was a younger twin.

Shigeru was in doubt. "If this article is true, this must be about my daughter, Megumi, who suddenly disappeared twenty years ago. The fact that the girl was on her way home after badminton practice matches Megumi's situation exactly. But this kind of story could be made up based on newspaper articles at that time." The prank call they experienced was an example of that possibility.

However, the word "twin" had never appeared in any newspaper articles at that time at all. Actually, in fact, Megumi had two younger twin brothers. Shigeru cared about this difference, but the fact that this article mentioned the existence of the twins, which was not well known to the public, made this information look more trustworthy. The slight mistake that reversed the older sister and the younger

brother made Shigeru think that the difference in the story rather increased its reliability as it had been told from person to person.

At the same time, Sakie Yokota was praying in a meeting in Chiba, not knowing what was going on. That day Sakie had announced in the meeting that her first son, Takuya (Megumi's younger brother of the twin) was going to get married. "Congratulations! It's great news in this hard time." Everyone celebrated and thanked God in gratitude together. After that, they decided to pray for Megumi-chan.

Since Megumi's disappearance, Sakie had always been thinking about dying. She was crying in her house in the daytime after her husband and sons left. She cried while preparing dinner. She cried while looking up at the ceiling. When it snowed in Niigata, she cried while looking out of the window. She had become such a fragile mother. One day, Sakie found some relief and recovered herself by reading a Bible that her acquaintance recommended to her to read. First, she thought that just looking at the Bible, which was filled with tiny letters, while she was in her depression, would make her even more melancholy. She had never held a Bible in her hands. But, when she opened the Bible unintentionally and turned to the pages of "Job," which her friend had recommended to her to read, she came across the following words.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away" Job 1: 21

Sakie was moved by this line. She felt that Megumi's pitiful life and her own miserable life was dominated by something really big, with which the existence of human beings could not interfere. By thinking that way, Sakie felt relieved. Soon, Sakie began attending services at church, and 7 years after Megumi's disappearance, she was baptized. She believed that human beings face death inevitably, so when death came, her spirit could meet Megumi's spirit in peace. By thinking so, she gained determination.

Later, when Megumi's "death" was pronounced following Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to North Korea, Sakie asserted with tears at the news conference of Abductee Family Association, "Everyone dies someday. By thinking she left deep footprints, I will live strong and struggle with folks." She did not dissolve into tears with the determination to confront Kim Jong-il, who would be watching the conference somewhere.

At every service, people prayed for the missing Megumi, but that day, January 21, 1997, was special. After the prayer of gratitude for Sakie's first son Takuya's engagement, they decided to pray to God so that God would tell them

where Megumi was. All of them prayed earnestly. One by one, each of them prayed hard with tears as if Megumi were a child of each one.

That day, when Sakie came home, Shigeru, who was waiting for her, said, ‘I heard that Megumi is in North Korea.’ After the twenty long years, Megumi’s whereabouts were finally known. The day of January 21, 1997 became an unforgettable one.

By chance, the numbers 1 and 21 were the same as the chapter 1 and the verse 21 of the Book of Job in Bible, which had impressed her.

However, Shigeru, who was uncertain about the information, could not tell it to his wife directly. When Sakie came back from the service in Chiba to Kawasaki, it was already almost 6 p.m. At home, Shigeru was contemplating something, sitting on the sofa. He seemed to want to say something, but he did not open his mouth after saying, ‘Today, something strange happened.’ In speaking of strange, weird and abnormal things, it was clear to Sakie that it was about their daughter. Seeing Shigeru’s reflective look, Sakie said, ‘Is it about Megumi by any chance?’ Shigeru said, ‘Yes, it is actually.’

Shigeru later said, ‘At that moment, I could not say it directly because I was afraid of making my wife live in a fool’s paradise. If the information seemed trustworthy, I would have made a phone call to her, saying ‘Megumi was found!’ or I might have been waiting for her in front of the house. But, I myself could not believe it. The story I heard was too strange to believe.’

‘North Korea’ was so foreign to him. However, after hearing that from Shigeru, Sakie could not stop her fast beating heart. She was thrilled with excitement and joy. ‘Megumi-chan, you are alive.’

Sakie told Megumi’s twin brothers right away.

Her first son, Takuya, lived in Fukuoka after he transferred there. In January that year, he brought a lady whom he wanted to marry to his parents’ home in Kawasaki. But, Takuya was unable to tell his girlfriend about Megumi. He could not confide to her that he had a missing sister who was four years older than him. Takuya had been hesitant to talk about his brother, sister and family since he was a student. At the club in high school, at the welcome party for freshmen in college and the meetings with his friends, people began talking about their birthplaces or families, but he hated it. As he became close to his friends, he finally had to talk about his sister. So, he was always hesitant to be in such places.

His younger twin brother, Tetsuya, felt the same. When he was in junior high school, because of Shigeru’s transfer, he transferred from Niigata, where the incident happened, to a school in Tokyo. Since then, he persisted in his efforts to say, ‘My family has twin brothers. That’s all.’ The disappearance of their sister had been kept back in their minds deep down as an untouchable gloomy affair.

Shigeru and Sakie told Takuya, who brought his girlfriend, that it would be better for him to tell her about Megumi soon by himself before she heard it from others. Only about half a month after that day in January, the information that Megumi was in North Korea was suddenly brought to the family. Takuya, who was in Fukuoka, felt as if he could see the Korean Peninsula right over the horizon, and the cruelty of the near but far distance hurt his chest. Since that day, he thought of his sister every time he looked up at the sky.

The younger brother, Tetsuya, got a call from his mother at his home, where he worked, in Nara. "I really cried as the call was finishing. It was embarrassing, but I think it is natural for me as her brother. Really, I felt sorry for her." said Tetsuya. He said that while he was driving, he could not stop crying, and his eyes were glazed with tears.

In October that year, when the wedding party of the older brother, Takuya, was held, a seat for Megumi was arranged. Her nameplate was put on the table, and a dinner was served for her. Sakie rather felt sad because she could not help thinking of Megumi's absence as clearly as she could see the seat. However, she wanted to respect Takuya's feelings. He decided to arrange a seat for Megumi and he did. Until January that year, there had been no evidence of whether Megumi was alive or not. But, now it was found that Megumi-chan (like Sakie, her brothers also called her so) was in North Korea. Because it was found that she was alive, he wanted to arrange a seat for her. He thought she might come back on the day of the wedding. Just in case, he wanted to get ready to say, "Megumi-chan, have a seat here?"

Shigeru said, "At the time, I felt she might really come back."

In January 1997, Megumi was found to be in North Korea. In February, the media reported it to the public. In March, the Abductee Family Association was organized, and the group petitioned agencies and politicians. In a short time, more than five hundred thousand signatures were collected, and the Association submitted it to the Prime Minister's residence in August. While her family hoped that Megumi might come back soon, the clock was ticking away the minutes.

However, the activities of the Abductee Family Association and the desperate hopes of the abductees' family members, who wanted to get back their children, brothers and sisters, were confronted by not only the hateful and ominous North Korea but also their home country, the Japanese government and politicians, who were supposed to lead and support them. Even when they petitioned the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, their responses were merely superficial cliché, only rubbing the family members the wrong way. "We understand your feelings well." "We would consider the issue well and make an effort."

In their attitudes, there seemed to be no drive to get back their innocent citizens who had been abducted. They came up with no concrete measure for getting their citizens back. The Deputy Secretary General at the time, Hiromu Nonaka, who controlled the power in the regime, asserted the following in his speech in Niigata in March 2000:

‘Some people say there is no way that the rice aid to North Korea can be made without solving the abduction issue, but no matter how much we bark hard in Japan, Ms. Megumi Yokota will not come back.’

That was the time when the members of the Abductee Family Association were sitting in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the headquarters of the Liberal Democratic Party. The politicians treated the Abductee Family Association members’ rightful demand for the return of the abductees and their desperate voices as merely disturbance. Their cold attitudes only helped the assertion by North Korea that the abductions were inventions to destroy the negotiations between Japan and North Korea.

Since January 21, 1997, when Shigeru Yokota heard from Mr. Hyomoto that Megumi was in North Korea, the Yokotas were swept into a whirlwind of activity.

Two days later, Mr. Ishidaka, who wrote the report, visited the Yokotas’ home and told them the story that he heard in South Korea in detail. After that, he revealed a story that he gained from a different route. Around when she was eighteen years old, five years after she was abducted, the girl was said to beg. In spite of her mastering the Korean language after studying hard, she was told that they could not return her to Japan. Then she begged them to bring her somewhere, where she could see her home. She swore that she would never talk to her parents if she were under the surveillance of soldiers. She begged hard to get a glance of her family, but she was rejected. She was said to fallen into mental illness because of the shock at the time.

Shigeru and Sakie were heartbroken when they thought of the feelings of their daughter, Megumi, who was forced to live in this foreign country.

Following Mr. Ishidaka, journalists from three publications visited the Yokotas one after another. The publications were Aera, Newsweek and Sankei Newspaper. Because of them, Yokotas were involved in another big dilemma, which was whether they should reveal Megumi’s real name in the articles or whether she should be identified as “the girl M in Niigata.” As a result of their decision to reveal her real name, the abduction issue was set on fire. It led the families of the abductees to organize the Abductee Family Association.

However, until they reached the decision, Sakie “was thinking about it so much that she felt crazy.” She thought that if Megumi’s real name was revealed in public when there was no confirmation or proof about her case, Megumi might be



killed. Among the family members, only Shigeru was determined to reveal her real name. He thought that using an anonymous name would weaken the reliability of the case, and it would not appeal to the public as something important enough to be remembered long. He thought if the issue were treated as merely a transient topic, another twenty years would pass. Revealing her real name would become a message to North Korea that Japan had the information and was able to act if anything happened to Megumi. Shigeru believed it would help Megumi stay safe.

Moreover, he was aware that a Diet member, Shingo Nishimura (a New Frontier Party member at that time and current Liberal Party member), was due to take up the issue of Megumi in the Diet soon. He thought that if that happened, there would be no point in anonymous reports. In addition, the name, Yokota Megumi, had already appeared in a list of the Japanese abductees on the homepage of Modern Korea, which had not yet been well known. The list would be seen by North Korea, too. He thought that having her real name known widely in public would be safer than having her name only on a specialized site that would be seen by a limited number of people. As always, Shigeru piled up elaborate thoughts and made the decision.

‘Dad’s opinion is right, but it lacks a father’s point of view,’ said his sons. ‘Even if a rescue operation may be delayed, we should give the highest priority to the safety of Megumi, who has survived to this point.’ Sakie spent nights without sleep thinking about it, and she finally trusted the decision of her husband. However, when she read a draft of the article in Aera, which included Megumi’s real name, Sakie became upset. She called the boss of the reporter to ask him to wait to publish it. But, some issues of the magazine that were due to be published on February 3rd had already been sent to some local areas. The situation began changing.

On February 3, 1997, Aera and the headline of the morning edition of the Sankei Newspaper reported the ‘Megumi Yokota Abduction Case.’ By chance, Diet member Nishimura had an opportunity to make inquiries about Megumi’s case on the same day. Broadcasting stations and other newspapers began investigating the case on the same day.

Those reports produced new evidence. On that day, Mr. Hitoshi Takase (a former Nihon Denpa News Co., Ltd. reporter) was heading to South Korea to interview an ex-spy from North Korea who had fled there. By chance, Mr. Takase was surprised to see Megumi’s story in Aera and the Sankei Newspaper at a bookstore in Narita Airport and bought lots of copies of them. He showed the many pictures of Megumi Yokota in the publications to the ex-spy in South Korea. Mr. Takase apologized for the change, saying, ‘This matter is different from the purpose of today’s interview,’ and unfolded the magazine and the newspaper. The ex-spy mumbled, ‘I’ve seen the lady in these pictures. I saw her in Pyongyang.’

It was new evidence from the ex-spy B, which was different from the evidence from the ex-spy A, who was Mr. Ishidaka's news source. At that time, B concealed his name and face for fear of the safety of himself and his family left in North Korea, but he is now well known to many Japanese as An Myong-jin.

Mr. An had seen the lady several times in the Kim Jong-il Politico-Military University, and he had heard about the lady from one of his instructors who had abducted the lady from Niigata.

Mr. Takase told Shigeru and Sakie the following story that he had heard from Mr. An.

When Mr. An attended a ceremony in October 1988 as a sophomore student at the Kim Jong-il Politico-Military University, there were also Japanese instructors. One of the instructors who abducted Megumi whispered to him, "I brought that woman from Niigata." She looked twenty-five or six years old. She was really beautiful, smiling and delightful. Now that it had been over ten years since she was abducted, Mr. An felt that she would think that she had to accept her fate. Every time he saw her on campus on some other occasion, she was with another Japanese woman.

Those new accounts made in early February corroborated the "mystery" that Shigeru heard in January, and Shigeru and Sakie were convinced that Megumi was in North Korea.

Mr. An later published a book about the circumstances in North Korea. In the book, he also described the following incident that he heard from the abductor.

"The instructor said that he abducted her because she did not look a child at first sight. However, when they took her on the boat, she cried and resisted so hard that they shut her into the closet of the ship and went back to Chungjin. In the hold, the little girl kept crying "Mom, mom!" and scratched the entrance, walls and everywhere, so her nails were coming off and bloody when they arrived. I cannot help thinking that it must be such a terrible experience for a girl to be confined in the dark closet of the ship for more than forty hours."

When Sakie read this part, she felt sick to her stomach. "How could Megumi survive such a tragedy? How could she endure it?" Sakie did not cry, but she was filled with furious anger.

A month after Mr. Takase brought up the account by Mr. An, Shigeru and Sakie went to Seoul to see Mr. An.

The two imagined that the ex-spy would look very scary, but when they met him, he turned to be a polite young man. Both Shigeru and Sakie were convinced of his honesty. When they showed him a picture of Megumi that was taken a month before she disappeared, he said, "This face looks similar to the lady most."

The picture was taken when Megumi went to see her grandfather off at Niigata Airport.

As Sakie heard his story, she felt that Mr. An was also a victim of the regime, who was trained as a spy by the nation and was now wondering about the safety of his family left in North Korea after he exiled himself. As they parted, Sakie said to him, “Thank you for talking about Megumi. I pray for Megumi-chan’s safety everyday. From now on, I will pray for the safety of your family, too.”

Sakie heard that Mr. An was about to escape when he heard that he would have to see the parents of the abductees on that day. Although he was not one of the abductors, as an ex-spy of the same institution, he thought that he could not see the parents. After he met them, he was said to wail over Sakie’s words. This meeting prompted him to disclose his face and talk about the abduction issue.

After that, Shigeru and Sakie went to Panmunjum, located on the demarcation line between the North and South Korea. Just across the river, mountains and towns in North Korea were seen. “There is so close. Megumi-chan!” She could not help shouting. If possible, she wanted to take Megumi’s place as soon as possible. Soon after Shigeru and Sakie got back home, the Abductee Family Association was organized.

On March 25, 1997, the Abductee Family Association was born.

Early in 1997, with the help of Tatsukichi Hyomoto, Kenji Ishidaka and Masami Abe, a journalist from the Sankei Newspaper, the family members of Keiko Arimoto and the three couples decided to unite as one family for the victims. Each of the families had made efforts. They petitioned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and politicians for the rescue of the abductees, but they were treated coldly. They were filled with the same feelings of despair and powerlessness over such long years. Those families united and tried to stand up together. At the same time, the media was widely reporting the “Megumi Yokota Case”, promptly drawing interest in the abduction issue from the public. So the Yokotas joined with those families, starting the Abductee Family Association.

On the day of the Abductee Family Association’s official start, 12 people from the 7 families met up in a hotel, Azur-Takeshiba, in Takeshiba-sanbashi in Tokyo. The meeting was attended by Shigeru and Sakie Yokota, Kaoru Hasuiké’s parents, Hidekazu and Hatsui, and his older brother, Toru, Yasushi Chimura’s father, Tamotsu, Fukie Hamamoto’s older brother, Yukou, Shuichi Ichikawa’s older brother, Kenichi, Rumiko Masumoto’s father, Shoichi, and her younger brother, Teruaki, and Keiko Arimoto’s parents, Akihiro and Kayoko. Tadaaki Hara’s older brother, Koichi, was absent from the meeting although he had been a member of the Abductee Family Association. Okudo’s family joined later.

Shigeru and Sakie met most of the members for the first time, but they had already known about the mysterious disappearances of the three young couples because they had read about it in the newspapers a long time ago. The Sankei Newspaper reported their stories on January 7, 1980 just two years after Megumi disappeared. The report pointed out the relationship between the disappearances of the couples all over the country for the first time, and it inferred the possibility of the involvement of foreign intelligence agencies. As soon as Sakie read the article, she felt that might be the case for Megumi. With the newspaper in her hand, Sakie went to the Niigata bureau of the Sankei Newspaper and the central police office in Niigata to talk about Megumi. However, they just told her that the conditions of Megumi's case were too different from those of the other cases, and she had to come back home disappointed. Sakie heard about Ms. Arimoto and Mr. Hara for the first time at the meeting.

They named the group the Association of the Family of the Victims "Abducted by North Korea" (the Abductee Family Association). Akihiro Arimoto had objected to using the word "abducted," but it was decided so. Later, the quotation marks were removed from the name because they would cause a misinterpretation that whether the cases were caused by abduction by North Korea was not clear. By removing the quotation marks, the group advocated that the abductions were obviously committed by North Korea.

At the meeting, Shigeru was chosen as the representative of the group.

Shigeru said, "I asked what the representative would do, and they told me the job is to explain the contents of the meeting to journalists after the meeting. I told them that I couldn't do it. Because I worked in a bank, I thought I could be an accountant or a secretary-general."

Sakie said, "My husband is shy, and he was not the kind of person at that time who talks a lot like he does today."

Because of Megumi's abduction, Sakie was baptized, and Shigeru changed a lot. After all, Shigeru was chosen as the representative. All of the parents of the victims were already old, and Shigeru, who was sixty-four years old, was the youngest among the fathers of the victims. Each family had embraced such a long history. Each of the families had finally united and organized the Abductee Family Association. The next day they petitioned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Police Agency for the rescue of the victims and had a press conference in the Diet. Each family appealed to them with large photos of their children, brothers and sisters. As the representative, Shigeru read out the following "appeal."

'Our sons and daughters suddenly disappeared, and there had been no clue about these cases. However, recently ex-spies who exiled themselves from North

Korea gave accounts that they had seen some of those victims, which are beams of hope in the dark for the families left behind. We really feel we want any help.”

After describing the history, the “appeal” continued.

“The government should promptly make efforts to reveal the truth about these cases. They should collect information through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, send officers to South Korea, and confirm the cases with the help of the South Korean government. Based on those efforts, we want the government to demand the return of the victims from North Korea with a resolute stand. We do not oppose the food aid to North Korea, but speaking from the humanitarian standpoint, we frankly think that our sons and daughters must come back first. Since our sons and daughters have disappeared, it has already been more than fifteen years (including one who had disappeared for the least length of time). The precious time that had been lost during those years cannot be compensated forever.”

On the same day, Shigeru’s father passed away in Hokkaido. He died at the age of ninety-three as if he made sure of the formation of the Abductee Family Association, which was to rescue his sweet granddaughter. A month before Megumi disappeared, he had visited Niigata. When he saw Megumi off at Niigata Airport, it became the last good-bye between Megumi and him. Mr. An had pointed to the picture of Megumi taken by Shigeru at the airport at that time and said, “In this picture, she looks like the lady I saw in Pyongyang the most.” After the press conference, Shigeru and Sakie hurried to an airplane, subway and taxi to attend Shigeru’s father’s wake.

So many things happened at once in two months. However, a real storm would come later.

It is said that a daughter is the dearest to a father. There was not an exception for Shigeru Yokota. Although he calmly speaks without much manifestation of emotion, his detailed accounts of his memories of his daughter are a sure sign of his fondness for his daughter. Shigeru talked about his daughter’s childhood as follows:

Megumi was born on October 5, 1964, a year before the Tokyo Olympics were held. I was in Nagoya. In the morning, my wife said she had labor pains, so I walked to a main street and caught a taxi. Our home was away from places where we could catch a taxi. By taxi, we went to the Seirei Hospital together. As we got to the hospital, my wife seemed to be ready to deliver soon. Soon, they told me to

come in the delivery room. I submitted a request for a day-off from my bank, took my camera from my office, and came back to the hospital. I thought she might have given birth by then, but she did not deliver easily. It was in the evening when she gave birth to Megumi. While the baby's body was washed by nurses right after her birth, and her height and weight were measured, I was taking pictures by her side.

Because I wanted a daughter, I was very glad to know the baby was a girl. The nurses told my wife that they were sorry for her not having a boy, but she answered that her husband wanted a girl.

We had decided her name before. We did not want to use Chinese characters that were hard to read and write, and we thought Megumi or Hitomi in phonetic hiragana would be good. When I saw my baby's face, her eyes were small. I did not think Hitomi (meaning eye) would match her figure, so I chose Megumi. My wife was thinking of a boy's name, and Takuya was the first choice. Later we gave that name to her brother.

By the time the Olympics started, my wife was able to get up and she watched the opening ceremony of the Olympics on TV on October 10. At the time, in my bank, each of us had a break to watch the Olympics on TV one after the other. My turn came on the day of a marathon race, and I watched Abebe and Tsuburaya running in the race.

Megumi was fat and heavy, so every time we went out, I carried her. When our twin brothers were born 4 years later, my wife was busy taking care of them. When Megumi wanted to take a pee at midnight, I always took her to the bathroom. Since her brothers were born, I always took care of Megumi. So, after she grew up, Megumi was often with her father. When we went to see movies, my wife took her brothers to an animation movie while I parted from them and took Megumi to a movie that she wanted to see. When she said she wanted to see Takarazuka play, I took her. I do not play golf, but I loved to travel with my family. I liked taking pictures during our trips. There are so many pictures of Megumi.

Megumi liked reading books. Her thoughts were more mature than those of average children, so she was able to understand well when she talked with adults. Because of my transfer, we moved from Hiroshima to Niigata during the summer vacation when Megumi was in the sixth grade. During a short period before her graduation, she had borrowed more books from the school library than any other student did. On the contrary, speaking of sociability, she may be immature because I did everything for her. I kept her allowance and deposited it in a post office near my workplace.

Megumi had not reached a rebellious stage yet, so she did not hesitate to walk with me when she was a junior high school student. On the day of the school entrance ceremony at Niigata city Yorii Junior High School, Megumi got German

measles, and her doctor told her not to attend the ceremony because her disease was contagious. In Megumi's place, I attended the ceremony, wrote down the school principal's talk, came back home and told her things such as that this school does not provide lunch.

Because I could not take pictures of Megumi in school, I made her put on her school uniform and hold her school bag, and I took her to the school gate on Sunday before the classes started in order to take pictures of her. If we did it a week later, cherry blossoms would have fallen off, so we wanted to get the pictures that day. Megumi, who had just recovered from sickness, had not washed her hair, so she was reluctant to be in a picture for fear of being photographed badly. Those pictures were later used in posters for investigation.

November 14th, when Megumi was in her second semester in her first year of junior high school, was my forty-fifth birthday. Megumi gave me a pocket comb, saying 'Dad, care more about your appearance.' I still carry it now. The comb is not damaged, but its case is shabby as you can see."

Saying so, he took out the case. Parts of the case were faded. The day after Shigeru's birthday, November 15, 1977, Megumi suddenly disappeared on her way home from school. It has been more than 25 years since that day. The fading comb case tells the length of the years.

On that night, Sakie was at home in Suido-cho, Niigata, worrying about her daughter's delayed return. Megumi practiced badminton in a club after school since she entered junior high school. She usually came back home at around 6 p.m. However, she did not come back home after 7 p.m.

Her school was a 10-minute walk from her home, but the street on the way was dark. On one side, there was an uninhabited hotel that had gone out of business because of a fire. On the other side, there was a large opening, where there used to be a campus of the science department of Niigata University, which had moved. The street was between the two sides. Her home was a detached house provided by Shigeru's bank. Behind the house, there was the Gokoku Shrine and the woods. Beyond them, there was the Japan Sea spreading out. At night, the neighborhood was surrounded by darkness and was very quiet. Therefore, Sakie was worrying very much about Megumi's delayed return without any contact. Something like that had never happened before.

Sakie felt so uneasy that she decided to go to the school, leaving her twin sons, who were in the third grade in elementary school. She walked fast, hoping to find Megumi on her way, but she only passed by a stranger. As she entered the schoolyard, she saw the building, whose inside was illuminated by bright lights. It was a gym. She heard women's voices, so she felt relieved to think that Megumi was still practicing. Although Sakie was returning to the schoolyard, she

reconsidered to look in the gym from its entrance just in case. In the next instant, she froze. The voices were that of adults playing volleyball, not students. She did not see Megumi and other students there. She was filled with fear. When she was returning to the way she had walked, she saw a guard. As she asked him if the students who were playing badminton had left for home, he said they already left at around six o'clock.

Shocked, Sakie ran home, hoping that Megumi would be there. Megumi might have gone out of the way, or she might have dropped by her friend's house. She was wishing for Megumi's return, but when she got home, she did not find Megumi's shoes at the entrance. "Has your sister come back yet?" Responding to their mother's urgent question, Megumi's twin brothers rushed to the entrance. As Sakie made phone calls to Megumi's friends in the badminton club, all of them answered, "Hasn't she come home yet?" Sakie called a schoolteacher who managed the club.

Sakie walked around with a flashlight to find Megumi, taking her little twin sons with her. She even went into the dark hotel, where she was usually too afraid to go. "Megumi-chan! Megumi-chan!" The three called out hard in the ruins.

Nothing was found. They tried to search the seashore. Again, Sakie did not pay attention to the fear of the darkness and went through pinewoods to the shore. As she saw several cars parked, she spoke to them one by one. As she asked if they saw a junior high school girl, some of them yelled at her. It would be natural because she suddenly lit the drivers with the flashlight. But, she was too desperate to think about what she was doing. She would rather have opened all of the doors and trunks of the cars to make sure. The three searched all over the shore, where they could hear only the roaring wind. The twin sons now remember, "We were so scared of walking in the dark only with the small flashlight that we cried. But, our mother's serious efforts were obvious to the little children."

As they went back home without any success, Megumi's teacher came to the house. At the same time, there was a phone call from Shigeru. He said he would come back home late because he was in a mahjong game place after the welcome party for a transfer in the bank. "That's not a concern. Actually." Sakie told him that Megumi had not come back home yet. Shigeru was so surprised that he caught a taxi on the way, where he usually walked to come home. His three coworkers who were going to play mahjong also came together. Shigeru searched all over the places where someone may be taken in such as the hotel and the shrine. The teacher searched in the school building. He thought Megumi might be confined in classrooms or bathrooms because of trouble with locks after she went there to get something she had left.

However, Megumi was nowhere. They decided to report it to police, and Shigeru called them. It was almost 10 p.m.



Police officers from the Niigata Central Police Station and East Station came to the Yokotas' house, and they started a full-blown investigation. According to Megumi's friend in the badminton club, Megumi and two of her friends left the school at around 6:25 p.m. The three walked on the same way. One a street that went to the sea, one of Megumi's friends turned right. The other made a left at the next crossroad. It was around 6:35 p.m. when she parted from Megumi, saying good-bye. The rest of the street was dark, surrounded by the hotel and the opening. Two police dogs were deployed. At the crossroads, where Megumi parted from her friend, the dogs smelled Megumi's pajamas and began tracing her usual way home. However, when they came to the last corner before her home, they stopped. She had come there, where she could get home in several minutes. Something had happened to her there.

Around midnight, the investigation around the area was stopped temporarily, and they decided to resume at 5 a.m. However, a team specializing in kidnappings stayed at the Yokotas' house, and they attached a call tracer to the telephone. Around the house, secret police cars were positioned. Shigeru and Sakie took naps by the telephone without changing their clothes.

On November 16th, a large-scale investigation took place from dawn. The mobile troops from the prefectural police arrived. The members lined up side-by-side and searched all over the shore, pinewoods and openings, poking the grounds with metal sticks. The police officers conducted interviews at every house in the neighborhood and around the place where Megumi disappeared. "Didn't you see this girl?" But, no clue was found. Supposing that the bank, where Shigeru worked, might receive a threatening call, a call tracer was attached to the telephone in his workplace.

Day by day, Takuya and Tetsuya felt their parents looked more and more pathetic.

It might have been caused by juvenile delinquents. She might have been involved in a car accident and taken by the driver. She might have run away. She might have committed suicide. But, who knew? There had been no phone call for ransom. The possibility of abduction was weak, and a week later, the police decided to go public with the case. The Niigata Nippo newspaper reported the missing case with her picture on its headline. Of national newspapers, the Mainichi Newspaper ran a small article. The other national papers reported the case only on their local editions in Niigata.

Despite the public investigation, no information was obtained. It became the largest investigation into a case of a missing person in the history of the Niigata Prefectural Police. Guard boats on the sea searched the gaps between the tetra pods, which were invisible from the land. When the waves were calm, a helicopter

searched along the shore up to Yamagata Prefecture. Divers volunteered to search under the sea.

Every day, Shigeru searched the shore and saw different pieces of wreckage there. There may be something new each day. He thought that even if Megumi drifted ashore with a completely different appearance, he wanted to find her as her parent. Early in the mornings, he left home for the sea. After he came back home, he changed to his suit to go to work.

The second son, Tetsuya, said that every day his mother, Sakie, said to her sons, "What is Megumi doing? Where has she gone?"

Every night after their sons went to bed, Shigeru and Sakie talked about the whereabouts of Megumi and cried. The first son, Takuya, said, "I heard my parents' talking or my mother's crying from the gaps between fusuma (sliding doors). Every day we saw such figures of my parents."

Police officers came and went in the house. There was a telephone to which a call tracer was attached. The family was right in the middle of the case. It was an unusual experience to see the situation in which a world that Takuya thought should be only on TV was outside of the television. He experienced such a world in his childhood. He still dislikes to answer phone calls and to be in pictures. After he went to a school trip, he ordered fewer copies of the pictures than any other student for reproduction.

The dinner table without Megumi lost its light. Megumi had a very bright and cheerful personality. When she came back from school, the house suddenly became lively. She smiled at everyone in the house as a source of laughter. When her family lived in Hiroshima, she called a man who was walking to work with a quick step "teketeke ojisan (old man)," and laughed her head off with her brothers. Meanwhile, she was a kind child who took out a child in her neighborhood who hesitated to go to school to school with her. She liked singing, so she often sang loud.

Sakie disagreed with Shigeru, who said he would use the picture of Megumi that was taken in front of the school gate in April for the investigation. It was the picture that Megumi didn't like because she had just recovered from sickness. Sakie wanted to use pictures in which Megumi seemed more of herself who had a bright and sweet expression. However, Shigeru decided to submit the picture that Sakie disliked because he thought that using the picture in which Megumi put on the same clothes as the day of her disappearance would be more efficient to find her. Now many people know Megumi Yokota with a little somber expression on her face in school uniform in the picture. Now Sakie displays a picture of Megumi with a smile on her face in the living room at home. As the season changes, she picks up a picture of Megumi in her clothes that match each season, so she lives the four seasons with Megumi.

It was much, much later that Megumi was found to have been abducted by North Korea. Until then, the fact that Megumi had disappeared for an unknown reason tortured her family for a long time. Her parents, who were bogged down in the depths of sorrow, were hit by further various tortures.

The police asked them if they had insured their daughter, but because she was still little, they had not insured her. The police searched all over their house for a body. Despite the fact that Shigeru and Sakie were the victims, the police asked them about various things. The situation was very pathetic.

‘Did she run away?’ ‘Was she involved in a crime or an accident?’ Everyday Shigeru and Sakie kept exchanging questions in vain. Shigeru denied the possibility of her running away. That day she returned a book and borrowed a new one from the library. Her watch and bankbook were left home. The payday of the Bank of Japan, where Shigeru worked, at that time was the 15th of each month. Megumi also got her allowance on the same day. She would have left home after that day. However, denying her running away meant that she disappeared because of a criminal or an accident, so the worst case had to be assumed. Sakie opposed the idea. However, if she had run away, she had to accuse herself. ‘Did I raise her in a wrong way?’ ‘Was I a bad mother who did not notice her own daughter’s trouble?’ Whether Megumi had run away or not, Sakie did not feel relieved.

Shigeru looks back at the time.

‘Some people say that when there is trouble in the home, the family strengthens its ties. But, I disagree. Actually, trouble rather has a strong force to make the family fall down. Because the reason for her disappearance was unknown, we could not resolve our feelings. If we hoped that our daughter was alive, then the reason had to be that she had run away, but this contradicted those happy years with Megumi. At worst, we might have reached the point where we had to divorce each other. In our household, we had twin brothers, and we had to bring them up. My wife could not cry all the time. It propped up our family.’

Right after the case, Shigeru took a week off from work and slept by the telephone, expecting a call from Megumi or an abductor. However, as days passed, nothing happened. Shigeru resumed his work. At the time, the bank assigned night duty to every worker, but Shigeru was exempted from it because of his circumstances. When he was so busy that he needed to work overtime, his coworkers took his place. He was also exempted from business trips for the time being. After work, he hurried home. He worried about Sakie so much because he thought she might commit suicide. If it were not for the need to take care of her sons, something might happen to her.

Since her disappearance, Shigeru and Sakie could not leave home together. ‘Megumi may come back sometime. We should be prepared for it.’ They went out

alternately. They stopped taking family trips. They replaced the gate lamp with a brighter one and kept it on all night so that Megumi would not feel sad to see the darkness when she came back home. Until the family moved to Tokyo, they did so every night in Niigata.

Sakie would run to the window to look through it in the morning. There was a corner in front of the house, where cars made a stop all the time. She could not help making sure to see if Megumi would come back.

Since Megumi disappeared, Sakie was either crying or looking for Megumi.

‘During the day, when I was alone, I could not stay still. Even though I knew I could not find her if I tried, I could not help walking around the town to look for her. I went to strange places by bicycle. I looked in the back and stairs of the train stations that were not prominent. When I saw an apartment, I imagined that Megumi might be confined in it.’

Calling Megumi’s name, Sakie kept walking along the shore for miles. While her little sons got tired of walking and wanted to go home, Sakie encouraged them, saying “A little more. Little more.” Searching for any clue, she saw the film that Megumi said was impressive. Megumi saw it during her summer vacation before her disappearance. Sakie thought that she might be able to find Megumi’s motivation to run away, but it was useless. At bookstores, Sakie had got into a habit of opening cartoon magazines for girls since Megumi’s disappearance. Megumi liked drawing and was good at it since she was little. She drew pictures of characters that looked ones in “The Rose of Versailles.” Sakie supposed that Megumi might stay in a cartoonist’s place and take up his or her mantle. That was why she could not help looking for pictures that seemed to be drawn by Megumi.

Sakie and Shigeru appeared on TV shows that looked for missing persons five times while they lived in Niigata. Those were “Ogawa Hiroshi Show,” “Mizoguchi Morning Show,” “Look Look Konnichiwa,” and more. Other guests in the show immediately received calls from witnesses, but there was always no call about Megumi.

When Sakie saw a woman who had a round face and straight haircut like Megumi while walking in town, she had to make sure that she was not Megumi. When she saw a photo of someone who looked like Megumi such as someone among the crowd of a shrine visit on New Year’s Day or a clerk in a flower shop in a newspaper, she contacted the newspaper. The newspaper kindly sent Sakie enlarged photos of the people, but they were not Megumi. Shigeru scolded Sakie for associating everything to Megumi. Shigeru said, “Though I did not think the person looked Megumi, my wife said she did think so. When Megumi would be a high school student, she found someone looked Megumi at her age. When Megumi would be around twenty, she found someone who looked like Megumi at her age.”

According to Sakie, Shigeru did the same thing with her sometimes. When Shigeru saw a woman who was around the same age with Megumi, he stopped and looked at the woman with tears in his eyes. Their second son, Tetsuya, said, “When my father was watching a young woman singing on TV, his eyes were moist with tears.”

One time, when Shigeru transferred to Maebashi, Gunma Prefecture, more than 10 years after Megumi’s disappearance, Shigeru and Sakie went in a soba noodle restaurant, where they found a town magazine, Monthly Joshukko (Gunma people). In the magazine, they found a woman who looked like Megumi very much. She was a candidate from Gunma for the ‘Bowling Lady’ (a beauty contest hosted by bowling alleys industry). The article said that the candidates would play in the tournament held in Shinagawa Prince Hotel in Tokyo. On the day of the tournament, Sakie left Maebashi for Tokyo early in the morning.

She entered the hall thirty minutes before the opening ceremony started, and took a seat on the second row from the front. Soon, the woman in the picture appeared. She looked like Megumi really, but soon Sakie realized she was not Megumi. Sakie said, “From the beginning, I had realized that the person could not be Megumi, but as long as there was a little possibility, I wanted to make sure with my eyes. I did not want to regret not having gone there. I wanted do everything I could do.”

When Sakie saw a painting whose model looked like Megumi, she visited a gallery that displayed the painting. In the morning edition of a newspaper, she saw the information about a female painter’s gallery. The painter’s masterpiece was a portrait of a girl who had a straight hair and slit eyes. The more Sakie saw the girl who looked like a Japanese doll, the more the girl looked like Megumi to Sakie. Shigeru agreed with her then. The two went to see the painting that day. They met the painter in the gallery and explained about their circumstances to her. They said they thought that somehow their daughter had gotten amnesia and was now modeling, so they came to see the painting. However, the model was found to be the painter’s acquaintance whose identity was proven. It was two years before North Korea was found to have abducted Megumi. Later, when the ‘Megumi Yokota Abduction Case’ was reported nationally, the painter sent the couple a letter of cheer in which she said that she remembered their visit.

Right after Megumi’s disappearance, various strange people visited the Yokotas’ home in the depths of their depression. One said, “She was spirited away.” One said, “I saw a UFO around here.” When one said, “Such an affair that surprises the society happened because of ancestry,” Sakie cried, thinking of her parents who had lived their honest lives.

The family rejected invitations from various religious groups, but they visited some places that their acquaintances recommended. Tetsuya remembers that his parents were seriously listening to a priest. “The priest moved his finger on a map, and he said that in the place where his finger felt something, there would be the missing person.”

Megumi disappeared without any obvious reason and any trace or thing related to a criminal or accident. Shigeru and Sakie went out, hoping to find any clue about Megumi. When they went home, their disappointment was huge.

There were false rumors. One rumor said, “Megumi was taken to North Korea, and she went crazy. Now she is in a mental hospital in Niigata city. The police and the bank are hiding it.” When Sakie ran into her acquaintance while shopping, her acquaintance said, “Mrs. Yokota, I’m glad Megumi-chan was found.” “What? Where is she?” When Sakie asked her, the person remained silent. The incident let Sakie know about such rumors for the first time. To find the source of the rumor, she traced each person, but she could not find it after all.

There were also irresponsible rumors about the family’s dog, Lily. The family had a dog a year after Megumi’s disappearance to make their sons feel better. Megumi, who liked animals, also wanted to have a dog. With Lily, Shigeru walked around the shore and the shrine in search for any clue. Lily, the cute Shetland sheepdog, was popular among girls. Sometimes, some girls asked him to hold the leash. After several days, a rumor said, “Megumi-chan came back and took her dog for a walk with her father.”

Sakie fought the rumor seriously. The rumor would not only upset the family but also would decrease the chances that people would find Megumi, which was scarier. Even if someone really found Megumi somewhere, the person would think that because the case was already settled, seeing Megumi would not matter. The parents, who were still looking for their daughter, were afraid of that. So, they asked the police and the newspaper to announce that the rumors were false.

When Tetsuya heard his friends at elementary school saying, “Yokota’s family got a dog because his sister has gone,” he did not want them to say so. Lily lived with the family after they moved to Tokyo and died of sickness after more than fifteen years. On the day Lily died, Sakie realized that Lily had lived with her longer than Megumi, who had been in the family for thirteen years.

Shigeru had transferred every four or five years, but the bank considered his family’s circumstances and changed its policy. Shigeru and Sakie did not want to leave Niigata, where Megumi might come back. However, six years after the case, the bank asked Shigeru to transfer to Tokyo. He was reluctant to move, but his sons were now in the third grade in junior high school. If he moved after they entered a high school in Niigata, his family members would be apart. Shigeru thought he had to take care of not only Megumi-chan but also his sons in front of

him. The family decided to leave Niigata. The police told the family that they would continue the investigation so the family would not have to worry about it. The house where Megumi lived was said to be destroyed soon.

In June 1983, the family left the house. On the last day of their stay, Shigeru and Sakie posted a paper stating the family's new address in Tokyo to the grille of the entrance of the house. They wrapped it with plastic so that it would not be torn for a long time.

When they moved to Setagaya, Tokyo, no one in their neighborhood knew about Megumi's case. Shigeru and Sakie felt a kind of release there. There were no rumors or curious eyes. However, the sorrow from being cut off from the memories of Megumi swelled day by day. Many times, when Sakie was in the bright busy shopping arcade, sorrow suddenly welled up in her, and she hurried home by bicycle with tears in her eyes.

On that day in 1977, Sakie followed Megumi, who was at the entrance of the house and was leaving for school, to give her a raincoat. Megumi always wore the whitish coat. It was warm for the day in the middle of November. After thinking about it for a moment, Megumi said, "I don't need it today. Ittekimasu (I'm leaving)." She walked away. It was the last moment Sakie saw Megumi.

In April 1997, a month after the Abductee Family Association was formed, Shigeru and Sakie did street activity in Niigata for the first time. At first, Shigeru and Sakie were reluctant to wear sashes that said, "Megumi's father Yokota Shigeru" and "Megumi's mother Yokota Sakie," and to speak into the microphone. But, the many people who were signing the petition made them forget about it. They thought that the parents could not stay shy if they wanted to help Megumi.

Signatures by mail were gathering at a furious pace. First, the Abductee Family Association members were sending a signature list and a letter to each of their acquaintances at work and at school and to their friends and people in churches. The circle of friendship widened larger and larger. The Yokotas' neighbors in the same condominium also cooperated. Everyday, the ringing of the bell at the entrance notified the family of the arrival of envelopes with the signature lists. The mail drop on the ground floor of the condominium could not hold all the mail, so the postman directly delivered the mail to their room on the top floor.

Every day Shigeru and Sakie counted the signature lists that were sent to them. Each signature list had ten signs. They bound a hundred of those signature lists together. And they bound ten of those bundles together. Although they sometimes skipped numbers or dozed, they repeated the same work until midnight every day. It was a lot of work, but it was worth doing. Sakie wrote so many letters

of thanks that she could not put them in the post, so she brought them to the post office.

During the period between the end of March and the end of May, more than two hundred and five thousand signatures were gathered. They needed more than ten boxes of cardboard to stuff all the signatures in the boxes and to send them to Niigata. A worker from the delivery service could not carry them without a cart. They were so heavy that he could not help asking what on earth was inside.

While the Abductee Family Association was being organized, the gathering of the signatures on a petition for the rescue of the abductees was arranged by Harunori Kojima in Niigata. Mr. Kojima spread the information about the petition through newspapers, and he organized the Association of the Promoters for Investigation into the Abduction of Yokota Megumi and Her Rescue in Niigata earlier than anyone. Later, the same kind of groups were organized everywhere. In October 1997, those groups officially united as the National Association for the Rescue of the Japanese People Abducted by North Korea (the Abductee Rescue Association). Mr. Katsumi Sato, the director of Modern Korea, became the President of the Association.

The signatures that the Abductee Rescue Association gathered reached two hundred and fifty thousand, and the total number exceeded more than five hundred thousand. By the summer, the number reached almost six hundred thousand.

With the signatures, the Abductee Family Association visited the Prime Minister's residence. They were received by Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Kaoru Yosano. They could not meet the Prime Minister at that time, Ryutaro Hashimoto, although they had applied for a meeting with him a month ago. Sakie sent him a polite letter asking for the rescue of the victims, but she did not get a reply. Later, in the Diet, the member Shingo Nishimura made inquiries about the Prime Minister's schedule. He said, "I checked on the Prime Minister's schedule on the day. He received a courtesy visit by Miss something and practiced kendo. He should have had time to meet the Abductee Family Association." Prime Minister Hashimoto said "I did not necessarily know that the family was visiting me," and he promised to have a time to meet them. However, the meeting never happened during his term after all.

In the fall that year, the Abductee Family Association brought even more signatures to Minister of Foreign Affairs Keizo Obuchi. He promised his "best possible efforts," but he did not mention anything specific. The members of the Abductee Family Association were disappointed.

Later, Japan quickly made decisions to support North Korea with rice aid. On one hand, Japan decided to send a hundred thousand tons of rice in March 2000 and five thousand tons of rice in October. On the other hand, North Korea did not faithfully respond to the abduction issue at all. In June 1998, the North Korean Red



Cross said, “the ten ‘missing citizens’ for whom the Japanese government is asking for investigation do not exist in our nation’s territory, and it was proven that they have never entered or stayed in our nation.” It denied the abductions entirely. In spite of this fact, the Japanese government was going to send rice. This action would send North Korea the wrong message that the abduction issue could be left to one side. Therefore, the Abductee Family Association was against the rice aid at that point. The government made the decisions quickly, trampling the feelings of the Abductee Family Association members who were sitting in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

When the members petitioned the Human Rights Protection Agency at the Ministry of Justice in the fall of 1998, Sakie, who usually kept silent, got angry and spoke out. “You talk about rules. You say the issue is supposed to be treated by so-and-so. You say you cannot order other ministries. You say you cannot answer because there has been no case in which a victim is abroad. I do not expect that from you. This is such an important issue. Can’t you think about it seriously as your fellow Japanese?”

The agent was turning away the family’s questions and requests and only talked about the rules and jurisdiction. What Sakie wanted was not something difficult. She just wanted the agents from each department to say, “We can cooperate with you in this aspect of the issue from our position.” She wanted them to have such an attitude to work on the issue, but they just talked about the reasons why they could not work on it.

The first son, Takuya, has sent e-mails in various directions since his sister, Megumi, was found to be in North Korea. He e-mailed any place that might be helpful to the resolution such as the Prime Minister’s residence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Metropolitan Police Department and the Ministry of Economy and Industry. He also e-mailed President Clinton at the White House.

“This is a urgent issue. Why can’t the Japanese government take a step forward to its resolution? Wasn’t the policy toward North Korea at that time wrong?” Using bitter words, Takuya kept petitioning the authorities. While his parents were appealing to the public for the awareness of the abduction issue and their feelings, Takuya was throwing severe words at the government. He thought that was his role in his family.

Recently one of the officers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Chief of that time, Kunihiko Makita, said, “Is it fine to stop the normalization negotiation between Japan and North Korea just because of the ten people (who were abducted)?”

On September 17, 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi visited North Korea. It was the first time for a Japanese prime minister to ever visit North Korea. The talks between the top figures of Japan and North Korea itself took place for the first time. The door to the solution to the abduction issue was wide open. The members of the Abductee Family Association prayed for their family members' safety, increasing their hopes and fears.

In a conference room of the First Members Building of the House of Representatives, Shigeru Yokota was getting nervous before knowing the whereabouts of his daughter, which he had been waiting to know for such a long time. On that day, all of the Yokotas, Shigeru, Sakie and their twin sons, Takuya and Tetsuya, were there. Shigeru said, "I brought my sons because I thought it would be better for them to hear about Megumi directly than to hear indirectly through our explanation, saying, 'She lived in such a place.'"

Shigeru wanted to share the joy of knowing the good news. He believed in Megumi's survival so much. In the morning on the day, when Sakie left home, she spoke to a photo of her daughter at the age of 13. "Megumi-chan, come back soon." Megumi would have already been 37 years old.

Soon, the Abductee Family Association heard from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The members were told to come to the Iikura Official Building, and all of them were driven there by a bus chartered by the Ministry. They got there after 3 p.m., and they were told to wait in a room on the first floor. They waited long. There was a big television in the front of the room. The members thought it must be a hot line that would report the information from Pyongyang. However, it was just a television showing the news from NHK. After 4 p.m., the screen suddenly reported "Nine alive," but it was corrected as "Several." Several minutes further passed, and an agent came to the first floor and said, "Ms. Yokota's family, please come this way." The four Yokotas were the first ones who were taken to another room upstairs.

In the room, there were the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Shigeo Uetake and a councilor.

"I'm really sorry about this, but your daughter has been dead." The vice minister spoke in an assertive tone with his eyes turning red.

"I can't believe it!" Shigeru and Sakie jumped up, but the vice minister explained, "We had to have made you wait to make sure about it." However, to the family's question, "When was it (she died)?" he just answered, "I don't know, actually."

The second son, Tetsuya, talks about the situation:

"In the Iikura Official Building, we were heard the 'death sentence.' We were plunged into the depths of despair. My mind was blank. I was filled with resentment against the Japanese government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had not really done anything."

Actually, when we were still on the first floor, I saw a man who looked a high official walking toward us sniveling. He was covering his face so that people would not know that he was crying. When I saw that, I wrote, "It may not be such a good report" on a scratch paper and handed it to Takuya, who was sitting in the chair next to me. Takuya nodded. I felt something vaguely then."

The four Yokotas came back to the room on the first floor. Shigeru kept silent so that he would not show his crying. The family members were stunned, and others could not speak to them. Everyone was looking down. A silent moment passed.

Later, each family went upstairs and came back to the room in turn. When Hasuiké's mother who had just learned her son's survival came back to the room, she cried and apologized to Shigeru's family, saying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She was crying for the families whose family members were asserted to be "dead." However, Shigeru kindly said, "Please congratulate yourself on your family member's survival first." The Abductee Family Association members felt that they should not believe such things like that. Soon, everybody there embraced each other and cried.

"I had never felt such a strong tie between the Abductee Family Association members before," said Takuya.

"I thought even the word 'Family Association' was too weak to describe us. I thought we were a 'family.' I felt the real 'family' members were crying for the same sorrow together."

Around the same time, Prime Minister Koizumi and General Secretary Kim Jong-il were signing Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration. It was 5: 30 p.m.

Twenty minutes later, the Abductee Family Association had a press conference. First, Shigeru spoke into a microphone as a representative. "I was looking forward to today's result, but the result was death." After he spoke to this point, he found no words to say and coughed. While he was stammering, he finally made words. "It was regrettable. I can't believe it. I heard Megumi had got married and had a child. I'd like to know exactly how she was abducted, how she got married, and how she died."

After him, each family spoke into the microphone. Most of the family members were stammering and showed their sorrow and despair by which they were overcome.

Sakie thought they should not remain like that. If every one of them dissolved in tears, all would be over. She thought if Kim Jong-il saw them, he would chuckle at them. She was scared but she felt she had to say something. She unconsciously inclined forward from the back row, and while keeping back her tears, she spoke up at a stretch.

"Think about the feelings of the young people who had been victimized to suffer and who may have been dead for Japan. As such, the victims proved that

there was a really serious issue in the huge politics. This was really important to Japan. It was also important to North Korea. For such things, Megumi became a victim, and I believe that she did her duty. Everyone dies someday. By thinking she left deep footprints, I will live strong and struggle with folks. I believe she is still alive. I thank everyone who loved Megumi.’

Since the next day, September 18th, the irresponsible actions of the government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs came out one after another. First, it was found that Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Uetake asserted the “death,” for they just informed the families of the information that North Korea announced. Despite the fact that they made the family members wait long, they had not got any evidence to corroborate the information on their own. In the evening of the day, the Yokotas and Hasuikes came to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to hear an explanation from the Japanese Minister to the United Kingdom Kazuyoshi Umemoto. On the day of Koizumi’s visit to North Korea, he directly met the “five survivors” and a girl allegedly regarded as Megumi Yokota’s daughter.

Shigeru took his two sons there then. Shigeru says, “Yesterday, we were informed of her death. Today, the man who met Megumi’s daughter will explain to us. I supposed that they would show us decisive evidence related to Megumi’s death. It will be over if they show us a picture of Megumi’s body. I prepared for the worst. So, I took my sons there. No matter how the things turned sad and terrible, I would want them to make sure about it on their own, not by the parents’ words.”

However, Minister Umemoto’s explanation only made them angry. He said the government had not worked to corroborate the information. The 15-year-old girl, Kim Hye-kying, who was allegedly Megumi’s daughter, showed him a badminton racket and its cover that supposedly Megumi was carrying when she was abducted and a picture that was said to show her mother when she was 20. Nevertheless, he did not bring them back. He neither took pictures of them nor filmed them. Asked about her mother’s birth date and the place of her grave, the girl said she does not remember them because she was in preschool (when her mother died). How could the family believe the girl was a real daughter of Megumi?

The Hasuikes also got angry at the negligence. Minister Umemoto met a man who was allegedly Kaoru Hasuike, but, without a camera or a tape recorder, he even did not make the man write a message on a piece of a paper. Although Kaoru showed him a wound on his leg under his pants to prove he was Kaoru, the minister had no knowledge about it. He met the man with no clue to identify him.

The family, or if not the family, anyone who was seriously working on the identification of the long missing people would surely be ready to do the necessary work, but he had not been prepared at all.

At the end of September, the investigation team of the government made the second visit to North Korea and came back to Japan on October 2. The team went to hear from North Korea about the “death” and “its course” of the abductees who were allegedly “dead.” According to North Korea, while Megumi was in a mental hospital because of depression, she committed suicide by hanging herself. Sakie did not believe such a cruel story. She believed that Megumi would not die like that. She believed Megumi was alive. She was thinking about the “picture of Megumi at the age of twenty” that the team brought back. Many people who watched it on TV would think the woman in the picture looked too old for a twenty-year-old woman. They may guess that it was so probably because she had hard times in North Korea. But, Sakie believed that Megumi submitted her recent picture as a message to her parents that she was still alive.

The Yokotas got a glad result about Kim Hye-kying. Kim Hye-kying’s blood that the team brought back, the blood of Shigeru and Sakie and Megumi’s umbilical cord underwent DNA testing. On October 24th, the test finally proved that there was no doubt about the relationship between Megumi and Kim Hye-kying.

After 25 years, Sakie got the first “visible evidence” that indicated the existence of Megumi. Until then, the figure of Megumi that Sakie could see had been like one in a mirage. Everything started when Megumi mysteriously disappeared. Since then, she had been through the never-ending guesses, the irresponsible rumors, the evil false rumors, the chance resemblances, the questionable information about Megumi’s safety from North Korea and the accounts made by An Myong-jin that were merely hearsay but that she believed. All of those were obscure illusions covered in a mirage. However, she finally found the solid existence of Kim Hye-kying, which proved that Megumi was really in North Korea and lived there. That day, Shigeru rejoiced at the result of the DNA testing, and he felt he wanted to write to her no later than the next day.

Over the meeting with Kim Hye-kying-chan, Shigeru’s opinion is different from Sakie and his sons. Shigeru’s words took on sentimentality. “From the standpoint of the Abductee Family Association, we are not supposed to visit North Korea in any case. But as an individual, I want to see my granddaughter. If I go there and meet her, I can hear about Megumi or something. In the best case, I will be able to bring her back to Japan with me.”

However, Sakie and his sons oppose him. They do not think things will go so easily with North Korea.

Takuya said, “About this question, some say that the Abductee Family Association is splitting up or the group is oppressing him. But those words were said by those who do not know us. I rather think this kind of dispute happens because we are a family. Since we are almost one family, my father can have his

say frankly, and the other members state their opinions together in the same atmosphere as if saying 'Dad, it's not right.' The sight of the discussion of the Abductee Family Association members is that of family members who can say anything they want to say, so I feel it is a true 'family.'

It has been a long journey since the Abductee Family Association was formed. The serious problems of abductions were happening, and it took the Abductee Family Association a long time to make the public know and understand the issue. Every day Shigeru and Sakie lived with their feelings, impatient to save Megumi as soon as possible. Now they began feeling an increasing response to their efforts gradually. The Abductee Family Association and its supporting groups were hosting the "Citizen Grand Assembly." The assembly has largely changed recently. In the first assembly, the members worried about how many people would come to the Hibiya Hall in Tokyo. Before the assembly, Shigeru and Sakie kept writing and sending the invitation letters every day until midnight. On the day of the assembly, a thousand and nine hundred people attended, and they called it a big success.

Four years later, the fifth "Citizen Grand Assembly" on May 7, 2003 was filled with excitement on the theme, "Abduction is terrorism!" The five thousand seats in the Tokyo International Forum were all filled, and the additional space for a thousand attendants was not enough for the thousands of people who surrounded the outside of the building. There were almost as many people outside as inside. In the first part of the assembly, Sakie left her seat on the stage and stood in front of the people outside. She apologized to them for not being able to get inside, and she kept saying words of sincere thanks.

At the Evian Summit in June, the abduction issue was taken up as an important subject. The Japanese government prohibited the North Korean ship, Mangyungbong, from sailing into the port in Niigata. Slowly, the situation is changing and Shigeru and Sakie are feeling it. They are going to do anything they can do. They will go anywhere in or out of the country to appeal hard. In spite of their difficult schedule, the two go all over the country.

On November 15, 1977, Sakie's daughter suddenly and mysteriously disappeared.

On January 21, 1997, her husband, Shigeru, heard that, "She is in North Korea," which was also mysterious.

And on September 17, 2002, Megumi was said to be dead, but, in that country, another mysterious thing could happen again, a happy mysterious thing.

Sakie really believes it will happen.