

## The Families

### Chapter 6

#### Hasuike Family, Okudo Family

#### “Just Cry, When You Feel Like It.”

Hidekazu Hasuike was anxious. He had longed for this day to come, and yet, he was almost afraid of actually seeing his son.

How had his son changed after 24 years? In a photo provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, his son seemed exhausted and his eyes looked sunken. “Is my son, Kao-chan, really coming back?”

On October 15, 2002, at 2:19 p.m., a special government flight arrived at the “V1” spot, the VIP-only section, at Haneda Airport. Fourteen minutes later, the plane’s door opened and Yasushi Chimura and Fukie Hamamoto appeared first. Then, Kaoru, arm in arm with Yukiko Okudo, walked down the ramp. Hitomi Soga was the last to come down. Five people who had been abducted by North Korea and forced to spend 24 years over there finally came back to Japan. A large “Welcome Home” banner and familiar old faces of family members awaited the abductees. Cheers engulfed them as they walked towards the welcoming party.

Kaoru first found his younger sister, Midori, and exchanged words briefly. He then stood in front of his parents. “Kaoru is right in front of me right now,” thought Hidekazu. He could not find the right words, although his anxiousness was slightly eased when he saw Kaoru. He looked more cheerful than he had expected, and much better than his photo. “This is Kaoru. This is certainly my son.” Hidekazu and Kaoru hugged each other as if to confirm their presence. “I will not forget this moment. I will never forget each moment,” thought Hidekazu. His family has gone through the worst experience anyone could ever imagine for the past 24 years. He felt relieved knowing that he could now fulfill his role as a father.

Bringing his son back to Japan, however, did not solve all their problems. Seeing his son after 24 years was only the beginning of a new struggle. Hatsui Hasuike’s emotions were much more complicated. For some reason, she could not feel the joy from the bottom of her heart. “Am I a cold blooded mother?” she thought to herself.

She had made up her mind not to cry on that day, for she had been shedding tears for all these years. She wanted to welcome Kaoru with a big smile. But tears welled up as soon as she saw Kaoru on the ramp. She thought that she would give him a hug, but Kaoru who was much taller than her embraced her. When she heard him saying, “Sorry for making you worry. I am really sorry, Mom,” she felt the anguish of the last 24 years of waiting for this day ease a little.

Yet, Hatsui could not simply rejoice at this moment. Kaoru looked like he was suffering from a terrible sickness and had to be supported when he walked down the ramp with Yukiko at his side. And Hatsui could not shake off a sick feeling when she hugged Kaoru. His body was so thin and it felt like she was holding a skeleton. She felt sad. "My poor baby is so skinny. He must have had a difficult time in North Korea without sufficient food and freedom," thought Hatsui. Rather than jubilation, she felt gratitude. Her son had struggled for 24 years in that country and survived. Hatsui was thankful that Kaoru was back in Japan alive. She cried as a sense of gratitude filled her heart.

The night before the abductees' return, Kazuo Okudo could not sleep in his hotel room. He went to bed at 10 p.m. but woke up by 2 a.m. Thoughts of seeing his daughter next day kept him awake. He had been afraid that he would never see her again. Then, the day came. When he saw Yukiko walking down the ramp, he wanted to say something but not a single word came out of his mouth. His heart was filled with deep emotions, and the only thing he could say was, "I am happy that you look fine." When he managed to say that, Yukiko answered, "I missed you, Dad." He wondered if she had lost weight a little. But her smile was exactly the same as when she was young. Yukiko had not changed. It was such a relief. Next to Kazuo, Yukiko and her mother, Shizue, were hugging each other. They were crying in sheer happiness of seeing each other after 24 long years. Kazuo was worried about Shizue. Shizue had lost so much weight recently. She seemed to have lost 4-5 kg in just a couple of days, and she did not seem to have much of an appetite at the hotel. Before leaving their hometown of Kashiwazaki, Niigata Prefecture, Kazuo asked Shizue whether she would rather stay and wait at home. She answered, "I want to see Yukiko no matter what." Although Kazuo brought Shizue with him to the airport, he wondered if it was the right decision.

One day after they returned to Kashiwazaki, Shizue was hospitalized.

That night, Kaoru Hasuike's friends visited him one after another at Akasaka Prince Hotel where he stayed with his family. He enjoyed drinking beer with his friends. Although Kaoru spoke with a peculiar Korean accent which emphasized the end of the sentence and he looked totally different from a person whom everyone remembered, he was very cheerful and behaved as if he were still 20 years old. He talked about an incident when he and his friends went bowling in a car owned by his friend's father without permission and were scolded severely. He also remembered how much his friends had lost in mah-jongg games when he was a college student. But when they started talking about North Korea, Kaoru became quiet. "Come visit me in North Korea," said Kaoru repeatedly. "How in the world can we go to North Korea?" Kaoru's older brother, Toru,

thought and even felt repulsion towards Kaoru. “We are on a mission to normalize diplomacy between North Korea and Japan,” said Kaoru. “I have come here as a citizen of North Korea.” These words disgusted Toru. Kaoru’s name was Park Soon-chul in North Korea. Toru felt that Kaoru looked nothing but a North Korean just as his North Korean name indicated. Toru was screaming inside. “I want the 20-year-old Kaoru back, not this middle-aged man whom I don’t even know!”

It was the second night when the brothers’ emotions exploded. Toru said in a press conference, “Kaoru may be here with some mission. It is strange that he only wants to see Mr. Yokota.” Kaoru reacted to Toru’s remark in rage. “Why do you say such a thing?” Then, they began to scream at each other. Their mother, Hatsui, cried. “After 24 years of separation, you two have to start fighting. It is meaningless for me to stay alive now. I am going to jump off this window and die.”

Of course, it was impossible for her to break a hotel room’s window. His mother’s intense words made Kaoru apologize earnestly. The fight ended there, but it left Toru with an ill feeling.

Hatsui also could not really trust Kaoru at that time, either.

Kaoru asked his mother with whom he had just reunited after 24 years, “Can you give me the Red Cross people’s phone number?” He made it sound so urgent. He was referring to two people who had accompanied the five abductees from North Korea and followed them everywhere in Japan. They were suspected of being spies. Hatsui could no longer contain her feelings. “Why should I know such a number? Why do you ask me such a question?” When Kaoru said that he wanted to contact them, she shouted at him. “You don’t need to!” Kaoru finally became quiet. “You are Japanese. I won’t let you go back to North Korea even if I have to bind your feet with a chain,” Hatsui told him. Hatsui felt miserable and wondered why Kaoru did not understand his mother’s feeling. At that time, however, Kaoru was not “Japanese” yet.

Although Hatsui was determined never to let Kaoru return to North Korea, she very much doubted if she could keep Kaoru in Japan. The Japanese government explained to the abductees’ families that it was just a temporary visit. An itinerary prepared by the Office of the Cabinet Secretariat even included time to purchase souvenirs.

On the night of October 16th, the five families had a discussion assuming that the abductees would go back to North Korea. It was acknowledged that the abductees would stay in Japan for two weeks. The families were finally reunited after 24 years, but only in two weeks, they would be separated again. Hatsui could not believe that it would happen, but the government-scheduled visit would not change easily. She had to give up the idea of keeping Kaoru in Japan. The date when Kaoru would return to North Korea was October 28th.

On October 17th, the five abductees went back to their respective hometowns. At their hometowns, people began preparing to welcome the abductees when their visit to Japan had been scheduled. A little before 3 p.m., a bus carrying Kaoru Hasuike and Yukiko Okudo arrived in front of the Kashiwazaki City Hall. A loud applause welcomed them. Kaoru found teammates from his Junior High School baseball team in the crowd and he went straight to them to give them a hug even before the mayor's formal reception speech. When Kaoru attended a press conference later that day, however, he looked very wary. He and Yukiko gave a very short speech and left for their respective homes. Twenty-four years ago, they had gone out for a date and never returned home. Now, they were finally going home.

Since their arrival, the media started to follow Kaoru and Yukiko's every move. Their homes were surrounded by reporters from all over Japan, and there was a constant traffic jam on the National Highway No. 8 which ran in front of Kaoru's house. The media had ignored his family's plight and claim of North Korea abducting him for 24 years, but things were completely different now. To control excessive reporting and not to infringe on the privacy of the abductees, the media agreed on a voluntary self-restrained reporting pact, and periodical press conferences were held in front of both the Hasuike and Okudo family homes. Every type of media in Japan, including newspapers, TV networks, and magazines, reported on the family reunion feverishly with tear-jerking stories.

On the first night when Kaoru came back home, the entire Japan saw his family making a toast at the dinner table on TV. It was titled, "A Happy Family Celebrating Reunion after 24 Years." However, for the family members, the toast was a mere gesture. Especially for Toru, Kaoru's brother, it was an act forced by the media's request. Toru wondered why he should be happy to make a toast for someone whom he didn't even know to which country he belonged.

As for Yukiko, she was received with a very warm welcome by her friends and relatives gathered at her home. She was given a bouquet of flowers in front of a large "Welcome Back" banner. Her photo, taken in front of the banner with her father Kazuo and mother Shizue, was shown in every kind of media all over Japan. It was titled "Family's Joy to Have Her Come Home." This, however, was the last time that Shizue was to appear in front of the media. Kazuo told the media next day that Yukiko had spent time with her family laughing happily. At that time, however, both Kazuo and Yukiko had something to worry about. Shizue was not feeling well – it seemed difficult for her to even get up.

The next day on October 18th, Kazuo took Shizue to their family doctor's office. Their house was still surrounded by reporters. They had to slip out quietly so that the media would not notice.

“We cannot treat her here,” said the doctor to Kazuo. Shizue’s face showed symptoms of jaundice. The doctor wrote a referral to the Kariwagun Hospital, which was better equipped. As soon as Shizue arrived there, an X-ray was taken and she was hospitalized. “Without surgery, she will not live for more than six months,” said the doctor.

Shizue had been complaining about not feeling well. She said that something was wrong with her stomach, but the tests that she took every year did not indicate any disease. Kazuo thought that it must have been just fatigue. She had been working hard in a rice field until very recently. Kazuo was astonished to learn how bad her condition was and he could not believe it. Shizue did not complain very much but she must have been enduring pain. Kazuo believed that her illness was caused by heartache following Yukiko’s disappearance. Having a missing family member took a toll on her health. He felt rage towards himself. A month later, Shizue was referred to the Central Hospital at Nagaoka where there was a reputable doctor. Shizue went through a 10-hour surgery, and it was successful.

“Which parent does Yukiko look like?” Kazuo sometimes wonders. “I am not sure if she looks like me or her mother. But she definitely takes after her mother’s personality.” Even when she was small and scolded harshly, she never “made a blown face.” “Making a blown face” is a Kashiwazaki dialect that means to get sulky, rebel or become cross. Yukiko has a brother who is six years older and a sister who is three years senior to her. Both of them would rebel and get sulky when scolded. Children are like that. But Yukiko was different. She was not shy, but rather cheerful and friendly. She had many friends. Her personality must have come from Shizue. Kazuo heard that people who demonstrated a trace of resistance would not survive in North Korea. He believes that Yukiko could survive in that country for such a long time since she does not “make a blown face.”

Hirai District is located where the Kashiwazaki Plain meets the mountains. The Okudo family has been growing rice there for many generations. Kazuo was born in 1927 and graduated from the Kashiwazaki Agricultural High School. He had hopes for a new rice-farming boom after World War II. In those days, only a few people went on to study in high school after graduating from junior high school in the old school system. After the war, rice production needed to be increased year after year and farmers had higher incomes than white-collar workers. It was the government’s agricultural policy implemented in 1965 to reduce rice field acreage that cast a dark shadow over rice farming’s future. Because of that, Kazuo encouraged his son to become a police officer and only Kazuo and Shizue continued to grow rice. When Kazuo heard the news of Yukiko’s coming home, he wanted Yukiko to eat “Koshihikari,” one of the best rice brands, which he had

grown, as much as possible.

Shizue was born in 1930 in Kamo city, quite a distance from Kashiwazaki. Shizue met Kazuo through her cousin who was working as a teacher in Kashiwazaki. Farming requires hard work. Kazuo had been diligently working as a farmer in this region and Shizue also worked beside him without “making a blown face.” “Had Shizue overworked herself?” wondered Kazuo. Well, she did not even get sick when she was young. She became ill only after Yukiko disappeared. It is said that Shizue’s illness is mainly caused by a patient’s mental state. Something harmful had gradually accumulated inside her body over these long years, Kazuo thought.

Yukiko was born on April 15, 1956. Although Hirai District has become a residential area with a much higher population now, it was still the countryside when Yukiko was small. Kazuo named her “Yukiko” consisting of three Chinese characters. The middle character “Ki” means a tree. It is rather unusual to use it for a first name but there is no hidden meaning to it. Kazuo thought that it might be unique.

At that time, the Okudo family had the largest rice field in the area. When Kazuo was a child, he often found a memo upon returning home from school that said, “Come to the rice field.” When Kazuo was growing up, children had to work as much as grownups did. Things were different when Yukiko was small. Still, Yukiko helped her parents with her older sister in farming by planting young rice plants, harvesting rice crops, and drying straws. She also helped around the house often. She was skillful and she was a good cook.

Tajiri Elementary School, where Yukiko had attended school, was a small school with only 17-18 students per grade. Kazuo remembers that Yukiko used to ski on the hill in the backyard when she was in elementary school. That was the favorite past time of children in this area. Nowadays, it does not snow much, but the snow used to accumulate to over 3 meters then. What else did she play? Kazuo is not sure what girls liked to do.

When she began going to Kashiwazaki East Junior High School, Yukiko joined a field and track team, although she was not a gifted athlete. She was an average student on every count including sports and studying. She then continued on to a private high school, Kashiwazaki Jissen Girls High School. Yukiko did not mind helping her parents with their farming before high school. But once she started high school, she hesitated to do so and claimed that farm chores would make her hands darker. She was coming of age. During her high school days, a lot of her girl friends visited her home. Kazuo felt a little uncomfortable to having many young girls around.

After graduating high school, Yukiko started to work for Kanebo, one of

Japan's leading cosmetic companies, as a beautician. The main office was in Niigata but a satellite office was in Nagaoka, near Kashiwazaki. Her job was not to stay in an office but to visit many cosmetic stores in the area and give cosmetics-related consultation. That was when she began going out with Kaoru Hasuike who was a student at Chuo University in Tokyo.

Since they could not see each other when Kaoru was at the university, he often called Yukiko. Most of the time, Shizue answered the phone, but Kazuo remembers answering one of those phone calls. Kaoru might have visited the Okudo family's house with a few other friends but Kazuo had never had a chance to talk with him. He simply thought that Kaoru must be very smart as he was a Chuo University student. Shizue told Kazuo that Yukiko was dating Kaoru, but Yukiko never directly talked about it with Kazuo. He felt that his daughter was slowly going away from him as she became mature. On that night 24 years ago, Yukiko really went to a place with Kaoru where Kazuo could never reach.

On October 18th, a day after Kaoru had come back to Kashiwazaki, he went to see his 91-year-old grandmother, Kikui, before seeing anyone else. Kikui had been going back and forth between her nursing home and a hospital. She was at the nursing home that day.

Kaoru visited Kikui and told her, "Grandma, it's me, it's me." But she could not reply immediately. She had been waiting for this day so much and her emotions might have overwhelmed her. Then, Kikui finally said, "Why did you come back now!" and slapped Kaoru's face. She might have wanted to say why he couldn't come back sooner. As Toru watched their reunion, he thought that the only thing that had kept Kikui alive was her wish to see Kaoru again and he made it to see her.

When the brothers were young, Kikui took care of them since their mother, Hatsui, was working full time at the City Hall. Kikui used to tell the boys, "I nursed you when you were babies." Actually, Toru does remember him and his brother sleeping with Kikui in the middle who suckled the boys until elementary school. Hatsui also remembers it was always Kikui who visited the boys' elementary school classes on the parents' visit days.

When a schoolteacher came to their house as a part of her routine visit, she told Hatsui who answered the door, "May I see Grandma? She would know more about your kids." The brothers were both "grandma's boys."

When Kaoru was a small child, the Hasuike family had a complicated family structure. An elder brother of Kaoru's grandfather on his mother's side did not have any children, and the grandfather agreed to be adopted by his elder brother. On the official family registry, the grandfather and his brother were a son

and a parent. Therefore, when Kaoru was small, he lived with his grandparents on his mother's side, the grandfather's brother and his wife, Hidekazu (father), Hatsui (mother), Toru (elder brother), and Midori (a younger sister four years junior to Kaoru), altogether nine. Kaoru's mother, Hatsui, was born in 1932 as the first of four daughters of the Hasuike family. Since there was no son to bear the family name, Hidekazu took Hasuike's family name upon marrying Hatsui. Hidekazu must have gone through difficult times as a son-in-law living with his wife's family. But Toru and Kaoru were loved especially by their grandparents because they were boys born to the Hasuike family after a long succession of girls.

Hidekazu was born in 1927 in the Kitajo area, which was trapped in the hills of Kashiwazaki. He struggled through college and finally became a teacher. He worked at various schools in the area for 42 years, and retired from the Kashiwazaki School for Handicapped. From Toru's point of view, his father was a strict, typical teacher type as a parent. He was very strict and firm when it came to discipline but was very supportive of his children's education. After he became a father, he began refusing to be transferred. That is why he could not be promoted and never became a school principal, he says. That is how he devoted his life for his children's education.

Hidekazu was very frugal. Even when his kids ordered expensive pork cutlet rice bowls at a restaurant, he only ordered much cheaper noodles for himself. Although he tried to live thriftily, when winter came, he always took his children to ski resorts such as Akakura, Ikeno-taira, or Kumado of Myoko. In those days, very few children could go to a skiing slope in a resort area even in snowy Niigata prefecture. Toru and Kaoru called their parents "Papa and Mama," which was very unique in the area at that time. Toru believed that this was a part of Hidekazu's belief in education and high culture. Kaoru eventually graduated Kashiwazaki High School, which enjoyed a high reputation in the area, and went on to Chuo University's law department. The university was then competing with Tokyo University, in the number of students who passed the national bar exam. Hidekazu felt so proud of Kaoru going to the university.

Hatsui brought up three children while working at the Kashiwazaki City Hall for 43 years. Since Kikui, the grandmother, took care of the children, Hatsui could continue to work. But there were times when she worried about her children because she could not be with them as other mothers could. If her children could grow up without any incident, it should be fine. For some reason, however, Kaoru often put himself in life-and-death situations.

On September 29, 1957, 25-year-old Hatsui was busy harvesting rice crops from the rice field. In the west, she could see Mt. Yoneyama, which was famous



for the “Sangai-bushi” song. The Kashiwazaki Plain was famous for its rice yield in Niigata prefecture and even Hatsui who worked at the City Hall had to help the family to harvest rice. She was 8-month pregnant then, but she could not excuse herself from harvesting.

Hatsui felt something wrong in her lower abdomen before noon. She hurried to see her midwife and was told that it was an early amniorrhexis. It was not unusual for the amniotic fluid to leak before the childbirth. But both mother and child’s lives would be in danger if it were untreated. Hatsui was immediately sent to Kariwagun Hospital. The doctor treated her to stop the amniorrhexis, but she was also told that it might be too late. An immediate Caesarean section was required. But it was Sunday and there was no surgeon or obstetrician at the hospital. In pain, Hatsui was beginning to think that her unborn child might not survive. But luck was with her. Several doctors were playing baseball in the back of the hospital. They came to the rescue and a Caesarean section was performed. Around 6 p.m., Hatsui had a little boy and that was Kaoru.

Then, it was Kaoru’s field trip day in May soon after Kaoru started Hiyoshi Elementary School. Hatsui, once again, had to go through the nightmarish experience of a life-and-death situation.

It was an ordinary weekday and Hatsui was working in her City Hall office. She received an urgent call from a hospital notifying her that Kaoru had been in a car accident. She rushed to the hospital. After coming back from school, Kaoru tried to catch up with Kikui who had gone to pick up Kaoru’s sister Midori at her kindergarten. Kaoru was hit by a three-wheel automobile. His small body was dragged over 10 meters on rough unpaved road. His left leg suffered a complicated fracture and there was a deep gash under his knee. The skin on top of his right foot was all gone. “Please prepare for the worst case,” said the doctor. Hatsui felt weak. “We may have to amputate his left leg. Right toes may lose their mobility and Kaoru may not be able to run again.” Kaoru survived the incident but was hospitalized for more than 100 days going through repeated surgeries. Miraculously, he was able to be discharged from the hospital with his left leg intact. His right foot recovered and Kaoru could even play baseball by the time he started junior high school.

How lucky he had been! Hatsui could only sigh when thinking about Kaoru’s fate afterwards – being abducted by North Korea and having to spend 24 years without anyone knowing about his whereabouts.

Kaoru still has faint keloid scars on his left foot from this accident he suffered at age seven. He showed his scars to Kazuyoshi Umemoto, the Japanese Minister to United Kingdom, who visited North Korea as a representative from Japan on September 17, 2002. Kaoru insisted, “If you show these scars to my

parents, they will know for sure that I am Kaoru Hasuike.”

Actually these scars became the deciding factor to confirm Kaoru’s identity. Scars from the life-and-death situation in Kaoru’s childhood helped his life this time. However, Hatsui could never forgive the Japanese government’s response at that time. The government never conducted any preliminary investigation to confirm Kaoru’s identity, such as his accident in the childhood or the scars on his left foot. In addition, Minister Umemoto could not even answer Kaoru’s question when asked whether his parents were alive or not. Hatsui believes the Minister went there just to listen to what North Korea had to say.

Although the surrounding areas of the Hasuike family’s home in the Doai area of Kashiwazaki have changed into residential areas, they were still typical farmlands when Kaoru was small. Both Toru and Kaoru helped their parents to harvest rice crops or dry them. Hiyoshi Elementary School where Kaoru had gone was a small school with only one class per grade and all students were close to each other as if they were brothers and sisters. Kaoru spent his days playing catch ball at the playground or skiing in the school’s back hill with his friends when he was an elementary school student. Betsuyama River that runs behind his house has a levee now made of concrete. But when Kaoru was young, the riverbank was the place where kids could fish carp, crucian carp, catfish and sometimes snakehead fish. Hatsui remembers that her sons often went fishing there.

Kaoru went to Nishi-nakadori (Mizuho at present) Junior High School and became a captain and a catcher of the school’s baseball team. When he was in the 9th grade, his team was second in the prefectural tournament and went to the Nagoya Stadium for the central Japan regional tournament. Kaoru was also a very good student academically. His name was always announced as one of the top students after monthly exams.

Kaoru then went on to Kashiwazaki High School, which was famous in the area. He stopped playing baseball and instead became a member of a drama club. His high school did not have a uniform and Kaoru always went to school wearing rag-like clothes on purpose. Toru saw Kaoru as someone full of defiant spirit who did not want to conform to others. Kaoru was always defiant.

After graduating from high school, Kaoru passed the entrance exam for Chuo University’s law department. Unlike her husband who was enthusiastic about his sons’ education, Hatsui does not remember urging Kaoru to study. She thinks it was just a fluke that Kaoru had passed the exam. Unfortunately, Kaoru was not able to graduate the university and was deprived of 24 years of his life. Hatsui always recalled that fact whenever Kaoru’s college friends came to visit their house. They all had business cards showing their titles – Section Manager, General

Manager, and sometimes President. Kaoru is 45 years old now. Hatsui cannot help but wonder what if he had graduated from the university and had led a normal life in Japan... Why hasn't Japan to be able to rescued him out of North Korea much sooner? Why didn't the Japanese government take her plight more seriously? Hatsui feels tormented whenever she starts asking those questions.

Hidekazu could not see his son graduate from the university. This is the most regrettable fact for Hidekazu who had devoted himself for his sons' education. Hidekazu remembers having talked with Kaoru about his future plan just before his abduction.

Kaoru was back from the university for summer vacation and he was helping Hidekazu with farm work. Kaoru started to talk to his father about the future. This did not happen so often because Kaoru, as a very young man, thought of his father as being very serious and strict. Kaoru told his father, "I want to become a lawyer. In order to do that, I would like to become a judicial scrivener first and prepare for the bar exam. I hope you would help me out."

Hidekazu was so happy to see his son's willingness. "I would do anything for you even if we need to sell our farm land. Just do your best."

Kaoru, along with Yukiko, disappeared from the Kashiwazaki Central Beach a day after Hidekazu had this conversation with Kaoru.

Kashiwazaki Central Beach in those days was called "Back Beach." Nowadays there are many sports facilities and gymnasiums in the area, and many people visit there to swim during the summer. Before WWII, however, the area was used for army exercises, and later, a slaughterhouse was built. The beach was a very desolate place. On the night of July 31, 1978, 20-year-old Kaoru Hasuike was on Central Beach with 22-year-old Yukiko Okudo. It was the night of "Gion-san" summer festival fireworks, and there were many people on the beach. But if you walked away a little from the crowded areas, there was no one around.

Suddenly, three or four men came out of the darkness. One of them asked "May I use your cigarette lighter?" Kaoru thought that they were strange. At that moment, he was punched between the eyes. He was about to lose consciousness. A bag was placed over his head and he could not even resist. They put him on a boat and, then, switched to a larger ship once out in the sea. When the ship arrived at a port, he was released. It was Chungjin, North Korea.

Yukiko did not come home that night. There was no phone call from her, either. She always called if she was going to be late coming home. Shizue worried about her daughter very much, but Kazuo simply believed that Yukiko would come home in time. He knew that she was not alone and was with her boyfriend. The

young couple must have gone somewhere to have fun, he thought. But Yukiko did not come home when dawn broke. There was no phone call from her. Kazuo thought that it was strange and started to feel anxious, too.

The parents asked at the beauty store where Yukiko worked at if someone knew anything about her whereabouts. Yukiko had told her colleague that she would be seeing Kaoru at 6 p.m. in front of the library and would be back by 8 p.m. Kazuo and Shizue went to the library, about 250 meters from Central Beach. They found Kaoru's bicycle at the library. Since they were dating, they might have gone to a coffee shop. Kazuo and Shizue went to every coffee shop in the area with Yukiko's photo in hand. No one remembered seeing Yukiko. They also checked Yukiko's account at the Fourth Bank. She used that account to deposit her salary. The parents thought that, if their daughter had run away, she would have taken her money. But the money in her account was intact. If she had not run away, was she murdered? Or was she no longer in Japan? Of course, they did not even know about North Korea then, but it crossed their mind that Yukiko might not be in Japan. They walked around Central Beach but there was not a single shred of evidence that Yukiko was there.

About three days later, Yukiko's parents told the police about their missing daughter. It may be because their eldest son worked at the Niigata Prefectural Police that a person in charge of the security section came to see them right away. The police conducted the legwork. Kazuo believes that the police tried to help them. But the police had no idea about Yukiko's whereabouts at that time. It was much later that the National Police Agency acknowledged the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea.

Kazuo and Shizue had no clue about where Yukiko was for a long time. They even visited the Niigata Prefectural Police District Headquarters and the Nagaoka Police Station to look at every photo of deceased missing persons. They even appeared on a TV program "Ladies, it's 8:30" with Kaoru's parents. It was a morning show and a part of it was dedicated to public searches for missing persons. They received about fifteen phone calls. Based on the information they received, they even walked around Tokyo with their relatives, but it turned out to be useless. The information might have been a hoax. They even relied on fortune-tellers and hired a private detective in Tokyo. It was an older lady. She came over to Kashiwazaki and charged 200,000 yen as her fee.

It was on January 7, 1980, one and a half year after Yukiko and Kaoru had disappeared. Sankei Newspaper ran an article titled "Three Couples Mysteriously Vanished." The article pointed out similarities between cases of three missing couples and another kidnapping attempt in Toyama Prefecture. This was the very first time that a possibility of abductions by a foreign intelligence agency was

implied. Photos of four people, Yasushi Chimura and Fukie Hamamoto from Fukui Prefecture, Shuichi Ichikawa and Rumiko Masumoto from Kagoshima Prefecture, appeared in the newspaper with their names. The National Police Agency, later, recognized them as abductees. Kaoru was mentioned only as a “Chuo University junior student,” and Yukiko was a “beautician.” At that time, Kazuo and Shizue did not want to publicly announce their daughter’s name yet. When Kazuo saw the word “foreign country” on the article, he thought that his intuition might have been right. If it was true, only the police could handle it. Also, Kazuo did not want to disturb the police investigation because his son worked at the prefectural police.

On July 31st, Hidekazu and Hatsui were at work. Kaoru’s grandfather asked him to pick up some peaches at their orchard. But Kaoru said that he could not do that because he had another engagement. After he ate some noodles for lunch, Kaoru told his grandmother, Kikui, that he was going to the library and left on a bicycle. That is what Hatsui heard from Kikui.

That night, Kaoru did not return home. This was not the first time he went out without specifically telling when he would return. He was already 20 years old. His parents thought they would worry about it if he were a girl, and just assumed that he might be at his friend’s house. At that time, Hatsui did not know that Kaoru was dating with Yukiko. It was only after the disappearance that Hatusi learned about Yukiko.

The next day, Hatsui and Kaoru were supposed to visit Fukushima where Kaoru’s sister, Midori, participated in the national high school tennis tournament. On the way, they had planned to visit Kaoru’s brother, Toru, who was working in Fukushima. On the morning of August 1, Hatsui went to Kaoru’s room to wake him up at 6 a.m. He was not there. Hatsui called his friends but nobody knew where he was. Hatsui had already purchased train tickets to Fukushima for her and Kaoru. She was not sure what to do. She was concerned about Kaoru, but Midori would worry if Hatsui did not come to the tournament. She decided to go to Fukushima as planed even though she felt anxious about Kaoru. In those days, there was no Shinkansen (Bullet Train) line in the area and it took almost all day to get to Fukushima from Kashiwazaki. Hatsui left early in the morning and stayed overnight in Fukushima. The following day, Hatsui watched Midori’s game and finally came home in the early evening of August 3rd. Kaoru was not home yet.

Three days after his disappearance, his family told the police about Kaoru. They did not want to make it a public investigation since Toru had just started a new job and Midori was still in high school. The police assumed that Kaoru and Yukiko must have run away or killed themselves because they were a young couple. On the day of Kaoru’s disappearance, he had a T-shirt and shorts on with flip-flops.

He left his school report on “the Law of Checks and Notes” on his desk, ready to be mailed out. He also left his student ID, driver’s license and wallet at home. One day before he disappeared, he had talked with his father about his dream of becoming a lawyer. It was highly unlikely that he would run away or kill himself with Yukiko.

Shortly after Kaoru’s disappearance, Hatsui and Hidekazu visited every beach house and inn with Kaoru’s picture in hand. Every weekend, they searched beaches around Kashiwazaki and closer to Niigata, which extended over 100 km. Day after day of endless searching produced no clue. Every newspaper article about missing people caught their eyes. They felt relieved when descriptions of victims did not match Kaoru. Even though they visited the police station to check information on people who were missing or had run away, there was nothing to indicate where Kaoru was.

After appearing on TV with Kazuo and Shizue Okudo, Hatsui and Hidekazu walked around the Sanya area of Tokyo based on the information they received. Kaoru’s brother, Toru, went to Nagoya and visited hundreds of Pachinko parlors looking for Kaoru. Kaoru’s grandmother, Kikui, prayed to God and Buddha. She even placed a white statue of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy in the backyard and prayed every morning and night. The family even visited popular fortune-tellers. All of them said that Kaoru was still alive but it would take a long time for him to come home. It was hard to believe what they said at that time even though the family now knows that it was actually true. Did a UFO abduct him? Did God take his spirit away? These were the only thoughts that came to Hatsui’s mind. The first torturous ten years had passed and only left a vacant feeling with no clue about Kaoru.

In January 1988, one person visited the Hasuike family. Tatsukichi Hyomoto was a secretary for a Diet member of the Japan Communist Party at that time. Hyomoto was visiting missing couples’ families in Kashiwazaki, Fukui and Kagoshima to investigate a series of mysterious disappearances. His investigation resulted in a remark made by Seiroku Kajiyama, the National Public Safety Commissioner, at the National Diet session on March 26, 1988. “There was enough evidence to prove that missing couples were abducted by North Korea,” said Kajiyama. Also, in 1988, Kim Hyon-hi, the culprit of the bombing of a Korean Airlines flight at the end of November 1987, testified that there was a Japanese female trainer named Lee Eun-hye who had taught Japanese language and culture to a North Korean spy. Lee Eun-hye was later identified as Yaeko Taguchi who was abducted by North Korea.

Around that time, Hatsui suggested to Hidekazu that Kaoru might have

been abducted by North Korea. Hidekazu told Hatsui not to think in a negative way.

Kaoru might have been taken to notorious North Korea. If it was true, it must be a terrible nightmare. North Korea and abductions did not seem real yet. Then, a “No Interview” sign was posted in front of the family’s house. Whenever North Korea-related news came up, the media coverage heated up. But after a while, the media would lose interest and the topic would be forgotten. Hidekazu described this cycle as fireworks. The “No Interview” sign was a way to express a protest against the media, which repeatedly brought the family’s hopes up and down. It was also a self-defense method to fend off persistent reporters. The sign, however, did not prevent reporters from coming to the family’s house. Hatsui used to stay quiet in the dark whenever reporters kept knocking her door. She even didn’t want to see any reporters.

Hatsui spent many hours crying. Hyomoto, who had visited the Hasuike family around that time, described later that Hatsui had looked as if a crying face had become her permanent facial expression and she had looked like a ghost. Hatsui tried to be positive and told herself not to cry anymore. She had to go to work. She even told herself to forget about Kaoru so that she would feel better. But it was impossible for her not to think about him. Whenever someone knocked the front door, she hoped that Kaoru might have returned. When she realized that it was not Kaoru, it brought her tears. Those were the days of despair.

Hidekazu believes that those years were the worst time for his family. Kaoru’s disappearance was a painful fact for his family including himself. But the remaining family should not fall apart over this, he thought. He made desperate efforts to support his family as a husband and a father. He was especially attentive to Hatsui’s physical and emotional conditions. He even planned a short trip for his family to bring back smiles and laughter.

One day, Kaoru’s sister, Midori, told Hatsui, “Mom. Please don’t think about Kaoru too much. We are here for you.” Hatsui realized that she still had Toru and Midori to care for. She also thought that Kaoru would feel guilty when he returned if his mother had become sick because of him. At this moment, Hatsui came to her senses.

Finally, the Hasuike family started seeing a light development in 1997, nineteen years after Kaoru vanished.

When Hatsui was idly watching TV, she heard that Shigeru and Sakie Yokota began a signature-collecting campaign. Hatsui knew about the missing case of Megumi Yokota who had lived in the same prefecture, Niigata. When Midori, her daughter, had attended a high school in Niigata, Hatsui used to visit there once

a week. She remembered seeing posters of Megumi on telephone poles. Hatsui was not convinced that Kaoru might have been abducted by North Korea. However, knowing about another family of a missing person made her feel stronger. Hatsui consulted with Hidekazu and they decided to participate in the second campaign.

In February 1997, “the Association for the Search and Rescue of Megumi Yokota Abducted by North Korea” was founded in Niigata and the campaign spread throughout Japan. On March 25th, the Association of the Victims Abducted by North Korea (the Abductee Family Association) was formed. This brought victims’ families together who had been searching for their loved ones separately for the first time to cooperate with one another. The next day, the Abductee Family Association visited the National Police Agency and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and made a request to rescue the Japanese victims from North Korea. On this day, the families began signature-collecting campaigns and lobbying activities. As Hidekazu and Hatsui participated in these activities, they became convinced that Kaoru had been abducted by North Korea.

After starting activities that they were not accustomed to, the first challenge that Hidekazu and Hatsui had faced was whether to announce Kaoru and Yukiko’s names publicly. They were afraid that Kaoru and Yukiko might be killed if their names and pictures were disclosed. But no one even knew whether Kaoru and Yukiko were still alive. They finally decided to announce Kaoru and Yukiko’s names. Thinking back now, it was the biggest risk that they took.

This is how the Abductee Family Association’s activities started. In the beginning, the Hasuike family was not sure what to do. Hatsui had trouble speaking up in public at first when she joined the campaign in Niigata. She only had the experience of working at the City Hall. At the age of 60, it was the first time for her to speak up in public. Also, no one knew about Kaoru Hasuike at that time although Megumi’s name was well known. She wondered how many people were actually listening to her. There was no guarantee that her son would return even if she worked for the campaign.

Even after she decided to join the Abductee Family Association with a strong conviction, her feelings still became fragile from time to time. She would start thinking that Kaoru might have died at the age of 20. She even tried to force herself to believe it so that she could have a proper funeral for him. Then, she would refuse the idea and felt sorry for people who were supporting her. What if Kaoru was still alive? How would he feel if he came back and learned that his parents believed he was dead? Kaoru must be alive. She needed to believe that. She decided to keep Kaoru’s family registration and resident’s card until he became 100 years old. If all evidences of Kaoru’s existence were erased, Kaoru would



really cease existing in the world, she thought.

Kaoru's resident card was still in Hachioji city, Tokyo, where his university was located. Hatsui asked her younger sister who lived in Shibuya-ward, Tokyo, to re-register Kaoru as a resident there. The Shibuya-ward Office accepted this request without hesitation after learning Kaoru's situation. When Kaoru finally returned home after 24 years, his resident's card was smoothly transferred to Kashiwazaki because of this arrangement. After Kaoru's disappearance, the Hasuike family never had a funeral for him. On the New Year's Day or Kaoru's birthday, the family always set an extra plate for him at the dinner table because they continued to believe that Kaoru was still alive.

Although the campaign seemed to be an endless act with no specific direction at a time, situations finally began to develop. On April 15, 1997, the same year when the Abductee Family Association was established, the Federation of the Diet Members for the Rescue of Possible Japanese Abducted by North Korea (the Abductee Rescue Federation of the Diet Members) was also founded by nonpartisan Diet members. On May 1st, the National Police Agency acknowledged "seven separate incidents involving ten victims who had been possibly abducted by North Korea" for the first time. Because of this acknowledgement, Kazuo and Shizue Okudo, Yukiko's parents, decided to join the Abductee Family Association. The Association continued to conduct vigorous activities. In April 1997, the Abductee Family Association began another signature-collecting campaign all over Japan. Its members also met with Keizo Obuchi, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, for the first time in October. In May 1998, a request was sent to Chuo University to recover Kaoru's student status. In June, the law department's dean at the university replied in a letter stating that the university would accept Kaoru if he wished to be readmitted. In August, the Hasuike family met with Ichita Yamamoto, a member of the House of Councilors who was also a graduate from Chuo University, to ask for his support. In September, the Abductee Family Association members met with Keizo Takemi, the Parliamentary Vice Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In October, the members also met the Human Rights Protection Department Chief of the Minister of Justice. The Chief said, "We can not do anything unless the government acts first." This insincere comment made Sakie Yokota furious. In November, the Abductee Family Association members visited the Human Rights Protection Committee of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations to request relief. In March 1999, the members met Keizo Obuchi for the second time as well as Masahiko Takemura, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to ask for their help.

While participating in the Abductee Family Association's activities, Hidekazu continued his own campaign: sending letters that were hand written in a

traditional way with a brush to politicians and the government.

“To: Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto

Please rescue my son as soon as possible . . . Last May, the government finally acknowledged the seven abduction incidents involving ten people. My son, Kaoru Hasuike, is one of them . . . I am over 70 years old now and my wife is almost 70 years old. We are getting old and uncertain of our future. Prime Minister, at least, would you please verify whether my son is still alive or not while his 87-year-old grandmother is still alive and well. . . I sincerely hope that my son will be able to return to his parents’ home soon.

July 1998”

Starting with this letter, Hidekazu mailed out more than 300 letters including one sent to the current Prime Minister Koizumi. Most of the letters began with a phrase “Please rescue my son as soon as possible.”

Hidekazu has rarely received replies. Even when a reply came, it was usually just a formatted printout that did not show any sincerity. Hidekazu has kept all of his records since the days immediately after Kaoru’s disappearance until the present time in a scrapbook titled “Oh! Kaoru-chan.” Included in more than 10 volumes of the scrapbook are newspaper articles, the Abductee Family Association’s activity records, letters sent to politicians and their replies. This is a record of his family’s desolate struggle. Hidekazu is a quiet person, but this scrapbook shows how coldly the family was treated by politicians, the general public and the media during the struggle.

In May 1999, Hatsui had the most miserable experience when the Abductee Family Association conducted a signature-collecting campaign at Sukiyabashi in Ginza, Tokyo. Compared to Niigata, there were many more people walking by in Tokyo. But nobody seemed to hear the voices of the Association members who were soaked in rain. Only one signature was collected in one hour. Nobody was interested in the abduction issue yet. The media did not pay any attention to the topic, either.

In 1988, when Seiroku Kajiyama, the National Public Safety Commissioner, mentioned the strong possibility of abductions by North Korea at the Diet for the first time, none of the three major newspapers (Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri) wrote an article on it. Hatsui later found out about his remark. She wishes that the media had reported a story about this issue at that time so that it could have been solved much earlier.

More than the media’s lack of attention, Hidekazu, Hatsui and Toru

remember how irresponsible politicians and bureaucrats were and how cold they were to the abductees' families.

In March 2000, the Japanese government decided to send 100,000 tons of rice to North Korea against the abductees' families' protest. Ichita Yamamoto, the Parliamentary Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, graduated from Chuo University and the Hasuike family considered him their supporter. Yamamoto visited the family in Kashiwazaki with two officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 2000. Yamamoto told Hidekazu and Hatsui, "Please don't worry. We won't send any rice to North Korea." However, when he visited the Okudo family 20 minutes later, he asked for their support because the government "decided to send 100,000 tons of rice to North Korea." On March 3rd, Yomiuri Newspaper reported that the government had decided to send rice. Why did Yamamoto have to lie like that?

In order to show their opposition to helping North Korea, the Abductee Family Association members decided to stage a sit-in in front of the Liberal Democratic Party's headquarters. Makiko Tanaka, a very popular then-member of the House of Representatives, appeared in front of the Association members during the sit-in and said; "We should not send 100,000 tons of rice to North Korea."

Since Tanaka was a female politician from Niigata, the Association members expected her to be sympathetic to their cause. However, she continued to say, "Why don't we send 1 million tons?"

Hatsui can still mimic how Tanaka said these words. "Did she make such a comment knowing that we were the abductees' families?" Hatsui still wonders.

Shortly after Tanaka took office as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kim Jung-nam, a son of Kim Jong-il, was arrested for attempting to enter Japan secretly with a forged passport. Tanaka did not even try to investigate him and simply deported him from Japan. She abandoned the best opportunity to solve the abduction issue.

The abductees' families have only one wish: solve the abduction issue before sending rice to North Korea. Even if the Japanese government sends rice to North Korea, there is no guarantee that it would reach people of North Korea. The North Korean government would just accept rice and let the abduction issue wait. That is how North Korea has always behaved. No one wishes North Koreans to starve to death. Why doesn't anyone understand that? The Japanese government, however, decided to help North Korea further by sending 500,000 tons of rice as if the opinions of the abductees' families did not matter. Did sending rice to North Korea produce any positive results?

In March 2002, when Hatsui met Prime Minister Koizumi for the first time, she begged him. "How many years do I have to wait? Don't you have sons?"

What would you do if your children were kidnapped?”

She believed that it was the only chance she had. If she missed it, Kaoru would be treated as nobody again. Prime Minister Koizumi did not say a word. Hatsui could not tell what was in his mind. He might have been overwhelmed by her vehemence. She thought that politicians had only let her down for the past six years.

The Abductee Family Association’s activities went through a cycle of hopefulness and disappointment. Then, all of a sudden, “the day” came.

On August 30, 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi suddenly announced his plan to officially visit North Korea. The events following the announcement were just as dramatic to the abductees’ families. On September 17th, Prime Minister Koizumi visited North Korea. Kim Jong-il admitted the abductions at the top-level summit and even apologized. Then, a shocking announcement followed: five victims were alive and eight were dead.

At the Iikura Official Building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all of the abductees’ families were assembled and called one by one. It was as if a crude death sentence had been given to each family. The families were beside themselves with fear. When Hidekazu and Hatsui were called in and entered the room, one piece of paper was presented. It contained a list of all abductees’ names. Next to their names was a description: alive or dead. The result was too merciless to comprehend, even for Hidekazu and Hatsui Hasuike as well as Kazuo and Shizue Okudo whose children were alive. They did not even feel happy that Kaoru and Yukiko were alive. All victims’ families had been fighting together and they felt as if they all belonged to one big family. One piece of paper pronounced their loved ones’ fate. Hatsui was furious and shouted at then the Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yasuo Fukuda. “Why couldn’t you make a proper announcement in front of all families instead of showing us a piece of paper like this?”

She could never forget Fukuda’s reaction. “Shut up! Be quiet! You should be happy that your son is alive!”

What was he thinking? Did he consider people’s lives that lightly? Hatsui could not contain herself and cried out loud. Ever since that day, she does not even want to see his face on TV.

Then, on October 15, 2002, the five abductees finally came home. For a while after his arrival, Kaoru was not “Japanese” yet, though. He was scheduled to go back to North Korea after spending only two weeks in Japan. His family was afraid that the joy of reunion after 24 years would turn into the beginning of a new separation.

Many of Kaoru’s old friends came to visit him everyday in Kashiwazaki.

Hatsui hoped that Kaoru could fill the void of 24 years by drinking and talking with his friends. Then, he might change. One day, Kaoru went out for a drink with his friends and came back home a little drunk. He mumbled, "It's great to have friends. It's great to be in my hometown." When Hatsui heard that, she was convinced that Kaoru would never return to North Korea.

It took a little longer, however, for Kaoru to decide to stay in Japan. Koshiro Maruta was Kaoru's best friend throughout the elementary school and middle school. Even after Kaoru moved to Tokyo, they remained close. Kaoru mentioned Maruta as his best friend when the Japanese government's inquiry commission visited North Korea. On the night of October 21st, Maruta visited Kaoru with four other friends. They talked and drank together until 2 in the morning. Maruta told Kaoru, "Do you insist on going back to North Korea? OK. Go outside and dig a hole. I will bury you to the neck. I will never allow you to go back there."

The following day on October 22nd, Maruta visited Kaoru with a jug of sake at Akakura hot spring where the Hasuike family was staying. Maruta continued to persuade Kaoru not to return to North Korea with tears rolling down his cheeks. Hatsui also begged Kaoru. "If you go back to North Korea, another 24 years will begin. We will not live that long." Hidekazu kept trying to convince Kaoru, too. "You have no idea what we have been through during the past 24 years while you were gone. Many people helped us. You should never forget that."

Two days later, in the morning of October 24th, Kaoru confided with his brother, Toru. "I finally made a decision. I am not going back to North Korea. I will wait for my children to come to Japan." Toru asked Kaoru immediately to call Kyoko Nakayama, a Councilor for the Cabinet Secretariat. That evening, the Japanese government announced that the five abductees would remain in Japan. Eleven days later on November 5th, Kaoru made his decision public by saying, "I will wait for my children in Japan."

Eight months have passed since Kaoru and Yukiko came back to Japan. Even though negotiations between Japan and North Korea have deadlocked, Kaoru and Yukiko have begun to adjust themselves to their new lives as "Japanese" gradually. Kaoru visited Chuo University in March 2003. The university had already approved to reinstate his student status. He may go back to the university as a junior soon. In the same month, he also went to the famed Koshien Stadium to cheer for the Kashiwazaki High School baseball team. Kaoru and Yukiko officially began their part-time jobs at the Kashiwazaki City Hall in April. He also teaches Korean language at Niigata Industrial University and Nagaoka Engineering University. He even speaks in Kashiwazaki dialect nowadays.

When North Korea-related reports are broadcast on TV, Kim Jong-il sometimes appears riding on a white horse. Even if Hatsui curses at him, “Pig!” Kaoru no longer reacts.

As Hatsui watches Kaoru and Yukiko gradually regaining their sense of being Japanese everyday, she sometimes wonders if this is all a dream. Considering those 24 years, it is just a miracle that Kaoru is now with his family. Hatsui, however, cannot feel happy from the bottom of her heart yet. Nothing has been solved for families who were told by North Korea that their loved ones were dead. She has struggled with them and considers them as her own family. Those families are still suffering. Also, two children of Kaoru and Yukiko (18-year-old and 21-year-old) are still in North Korea.

Kaoru and Yukiko do not to talk about their children often. But Hatsui definitely understands how it feels to be away from one’s own children. She was in the same situation just until recently. Especially, Yukiko is a mother. She must be having a hard time. Kaoru always tells Yukiko not to show her tears. He might be thinking that North Korea may take advantage of their weakness.

Once Hatsui told Kaoru, “Don’t be ridiculous! It is natural for parents to want to see their children.” She also told Yukiko, “You can cry when you feel like it. In your bed, in a bathroom, or anywhere. You can cry loud if you want to. I did it, too.” Yukiko did not say anything but her eyes were filled with tears.

On May 9, 2003 Kaoru’s grandmother, Kikui who had played a motherly role, passed away at a hospital in Kashiwazaki at the age of 92. The cause of her death was acute pneumonia. Kaoru talked in front of the media, “At least, I could see her before she died, even if she was sick. I know she had been worried about me for 24 years. One thing I regret is that I could not let her see her great grandchildren.”

In a way, Kikui was lucky to see Kaoru again before she passed away. There is another person in the family who could not see Kaoru. His grandfather, Juei, died at the age of 73 in 1985. Even before Kaoru disappeared 24 years ago, Juei had been hospitalized due to partial paralysis. After Kaoru was abducted, Juei spent the next seven years bed-ridden in the hospital. He died with tubes attached to his nose and mouth saying, “I want to see Kaoru. I miss Kaoru.” Once again, Hatsui realizes how brutally long these 24 years have been.

Those twenty-four years will never come back. Kazuo Okudo feels the same way. One day after Yukiko came back, his wife, Shizue, collapsed. She has been fighting against liver cancer since then. It is a daily routine for Kazuo to visit her in the hospital. Whenever Shizue develops a slight fever, the hospital calls him and he rushes to see her. Shizue never “makes a blown (sulky) face.” She did not

express her emotions much but she must have been suffering since Yukiko disappeared. After Kazuo and Shizue began working with the Abductee Family Association, they had to go to Tokyo and Niigata often. That must have been a huge burden for a simple countryside farmer like her. Kazuo believes that anxieties accumulated inside her body and made her sick.

Losing a family member can produce such an adverse effect. If Yukiko had come back at least a half year earlier, she could have seen a more energetic Shizue. But Kazuo believes that Shizue must be the one who feels most disappointed. Yukiko must be feeling the same way. It is just heartbreaking.