

The Families

Chapter 8

Soga Family

A Letter from Ms. Soga

Among the five abductees returned to Japan, Hitomi Soga has the most complicated background. Besides herself, her mother Miyoshi was one of the abductees, although Miyoshi's fate remains unclear. Hitomi's own family, including her husband, Mr. Jenkins, and their two daughters, are still in North Korea. Given her complicated "triple distress" situation, we accepted the fact that she declined our request to contribute to our book: "The Families of the Abductees."

To our surprise, however, Hitomi Soga offered a letter to "The Families of the Abductees" right before the deadline of the draft. It was delightful for the Abductee Family Association to hear of her offer.

The following is composed mainly from statements and interviews of Hitomi Soga after she returned to Japan. At the end of the chapter, there also is a letter from Hitomi for "The Families of the Abductees."

'Hello, everyone. I have returned to my hometown for the first time in 24 years. I am very happy to be here. I am sorry that many people worried about me. I feel like I am in a dream. Peoples' hearts, mountains, rivers, and valleys all look and feel warm and beautiful. I hear the whispers of the skies, fields, trees, saying, 'Welcome back, you did well.' So, I can be cheerful and reply, 'I am glad to be back. Thank you. Thank you very much everyone.'

The above is Hitomi Soga's greeting on October 17, 2002 upon her return to her home in Mano-cho in Sado, Niigata.

Two days before her return, Hitomi arrived at Haneda Airport and the only person that met her was her sister Tomiko Kaneko. Her father Shigeru was waiting for his daughter at home because he had health issues. When they saw each other at home, they hugged each other and sobbed for a long time. For the first dinner after her return, the family served sushi, grilled sea bream in whole, red-white rice cakes and a Sado specialty, "Igoneri," which is a paste of seaweed. She was very happy to see her family members, classmates and teachers for the first time in 24 years and to be surrounded by mountains, rivers, valleys, skies, fields and trees in her hometown. However, she was sad not to find her mother among them, whom she longed for the most.

Twenty-four years ago on August 12, 1978, Hitomi was 19 years old and was working as an assistant nurse at Sado General Hospital. She stayed in the hospital dormitory during the week. She went home once a week on Saturdays and

returned to the dormitory on Sundays. On that Saturday evening, Hitomi went grocery shopping for dinner with her mother, Miyoshi, who was 46 years old at that time. It was around 7 or 7:30 p.m.

On the way back from grocery store, they heard the footsteps of several people. When they turned around, they saw three men formed in a row, following them. The men kept following for several minutes until they approached a house with a tall tree along the road. All of a sudden, the men jumped on Miyoshi and Hitomi from behind and dragged them under the tree. Hitomi's mouth was covered. She was pushed into a bag, and was carried on a man's shoulder. She did not know how and where she was taken after that. She had no idea what happened to her mother, Miyoshi. It seemed to Hitomi that she was taken to a small boat that traveled from a river to the ocean, and was transferred to a larger boat out at sea. She got off the boat around 5 p.m. on the next day. In retrospect, the place where she landed was Chongjin, North Korea.

After spending a little while at a guest house, she was taken to Pyongyang by train and she arrived there at dawn on the next day. After spending one week in a guest house in Pyongyang, Hitomi was transferred to another guest house. That is where she met Megumi Yokota. Hitomi lived together with Megumi for five months at this guest house and she lived with Megumi at a different guest house later. Hitomi and Megumi Yokota studied Korean together and played recreational sports, such as ping-pong and badminton. In 1980, Hitomi got married to Charles Robert Jenkins (born February 18, 1940), who was a former US soldier. Two children were born, Mika (born June 1, 1983) and Brenda (born July 23, 1985).

The above story of her abduction and life in North Korea was based on Hitomi's interview by an investigation team from the Japanese government, which visited North Korea in September 2002. One of her friends asked Hitomi on October 18th, right after Hitomi's return to Japan, "Were you taken and carried in a bag?" Hitomi said, "Yes, I was very scared." Her friend asked Hitomi if she cried a lot. Hitomi answered "Yes, I did."

Until Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to North Korea, Hitomi Soga and her mother, Miyoshi, were not officially certified as abduction victims. On October 8, 2002, Japanese Police Department certified Hitomi and Miyoshi Soga as abduction victims, along with Toru Ishioka of Sapporo city, who was kidnapped in Europe, and Kaoru Matsuki of Kumamoto city. On November 7, 2002, they recovered their family registration of Mano-cho.

Hitomi's "triple distress" continues despite the official certification by the Japanese government. While her mother remains missing and while she is unable to see her husband and two daughters in North Korea, Hitomi suffered further because of insensitive remarks by the media. "Weekly Friday" magazine's issue of

November 15th released an interview with Hitomi's husband Mr. Jenkins and their daughters, Mika and Brenda. Among the comments published were, "We want Mother to be home soon," and "Japanese officials broke their promise (to bring Hitomi back to North Korea)."

After she read the magazine, Hitomi vented her emotions to a local supporter. "Please tell the magazine that I am very upset. I am torn between Japan and North Korea." She was torn with grief much more after the media report of Mr. Jenkins's hospitalization.

The fact that Miyoshi's fate remains unknown also makes Hitomi suffer. That same year on December 28th, which happens to be Miyoshi's birthday, Hitomi released a letter to her mother, "I will wait for you forever."

"Mother, please come home as soon as possible if you hear me. Today is your 71st birthday. I believed you were fine and waiting for me at home in Yoka-machi until one week before I returned to Japan.

"Only my father and sister live in Japan and no one knows where you are. When I learned that you are not in Japan, nor in North Korea, I could not believe it and the only thing I could do was to weep.

"Upon my arrival at Sado, I was secretly hoping that you would be coming out from somewhere to hug me. But I could not find you anywhere. I was very happy to see Father and friends from home for the first time in 24 years; however, my feeling was mixed because I was sad not to be able to see you.

"Mother and I were more like friends rather than mother and daughter. My friends often said, "You two are very close. We envy you." Mother truly loved my sister and me.

"I remember one day in winter when I was attending kindergarten. It was snowing hard like a blizzard. I was waiting for someone to pick me up as I could not go home by myself in this weather. Mother came in Kakumaki (i.e. an cape for snowy weather—note by the editor) to pick me up. On the way home in her warm Kakumaki, I was wishing for bad weather day after day as I could get to go home this way every time.

"The chorus team of Mano Elementary School, which I was a part of, was going to perform as a representative of Sado in a competition in Niigata. Mother made baskets at night after a full day of work in a factory, so that she was able to buy a blue polka-dot dress out of the tight budget of our family. I was very happy on the way to Niigata in the new dress.

"The following memory was only between Mother and me. I believe it happened when I was in 6th grade.

‘My friend showed off her new sweater at school. It looked very nice and I wished I had one. However, I could not ask Mother for the new sweater.

‘I thought of a small amount of money in the drawer. I took it without asking and bought a new sweater.

‘That night when Mother returned home from work, Mother asked me to show her the new sweater. I was surprised because I did not think Mother knew that I got a new sweater and I was worried that she would be upset because I took the money without asking. Mother did not get upset at all.

‘Mother was crying and said, ‘I could not afford to get new clothes, so Hitomi bought one for herself, right?’ I felt worse than being scolded and felt very stupid. I cried and apologized, ‘I am so sorry. I will not do this ever again.’

‘These are the memories I had with Mother. Mother, if you hear my voice from somewhere, please come back. I will not believe that you had died no matter what anyone says. If any of the readers of this note have any information about my Mother, please let me know. I will wait for the day I see Mother forever.’

On February 18, 2003, which happened to be the birthday of her husband, Mr. Jenkins, Hitomi released a short comment to the press: ‘I hope he is healthy and well until the day we see each other.’ He had surgery in March to remove cancer cells in his right lung. As he said, ‘I was happy that the bad parts of my body were removed,’ and the surgery was a success. During the time after her return to Japan, which was not nice and quiet, Hitomi always thought about her mother, Miyoshi, and family members remaining in North Korea. On April 14, 2003, at the press conference six months after the return, Hitomi read a note she wrote:

‘Since I came back to Japan for the first time in 24 years, the time has passed so fast. Cold winter has gone and warm spring has come and I have already spent half a year in Japan. I have had the most confusing and complicated time in my life in these six months.

‘When I was in North Korea, I cried and cried, longing for Japan until I could not cry anymore. Although I thought I would prefer dying if I could not go back to Japan, I could not kill myself because I was too much of a weakling.

‘I was always concerned about Mother who was separated from me at the same location. No one gave me a clear answer; why do Mother and I have to put up with this? I did not do anything wrong. Why us? Why do I have to live with such hard feelings?

‘I managed to come back to Japan and saw my father, sister, family and friends from home. I met people all over Japan. Everyone was warm and caring. I

was laughing together and had good times. Although time has passed, people's minds remained the same. I feel so lucky to be able to come home.

'I felt like someone is deceiving me again when I realized I am experiencing things I gave up a long time ago. What happened to me was an unexpected major event.

'I think about another major event; I left my family in North Korea, with whom I had spent twenty plus years together in laughing, crying and encouraging each other. I thought it was going to be a trip before I left there. Now, I do not know what I should call it—it is not a trip or a run away from home.

'When people see me, they say to cheer up. I always thank them, but I do not know how to cheer myself up. When one problem is solved, there comes another sad problem. It is too much for me to take.

'I feel the deep love of my family during these six months. There was the following sentence in the letter from my daughter that I received in January. "Mom, it is the first time we have not seen each other in a long time. It will be winter break soon. I plan to cook something tasty during the winter break." The letter she wrote in tears is a priceless treasure for me.

'I have two families; Father, Mother, my sister and I as one family; my husband, two daughters, and I in North Korea as another family. Who tore up these families? Who can bring these families together? When will it happen? I want the happy day when all the family members are together in joy.'

On May 7, 2003, Hitomi participated in the Tokyo International Forum in Yuraku-cho, Tokyo. Her speech was the longest among the five abductees; she said, "When I see my mother, I will hug her tight and would like to cry until the tears dry up."

'I came from Sado to let people know about my mother who is still missing. Before I arrived in Japan, I thought my mother lived in Japan. When I learned that she disappeared with me 24 years ago and remains missing, I was so shocked and could not stop crying. It was very hard for me to see my mother's clothes and belongings, which were left at home in Sado. For a while after coming to Japan, I looked at these and cried every night.

'I had a dream a week ago. In the dream, I was watching the news on TV and heard that my mother was dead. After I woke up, I thought that it was just a dream and not real life. I truly believe that is not true. When I see my mother, I will hug her tight and say, "Thank you for being alive," and cry until our tears dry up. There are many things that I would like to do for her and her to do for me as a daughter.

'It is very difficult and painful to think about a family member whose fate remains unclear. I came to this meeting with a hope to find information leading to

my mother, and to contribute something as a family member. I would appreciate it if you can remember my message of the importance of the ties of family.”

Even though she is one of the abductees, Hitomi applies to be a member of the Abductee Family Association to request the return of her mother, Miyoshi, and the recognition of the fact of Miyoshi’s abduction, which North Korea denies. With this strong wish for her mother, Hitomi wrote the following letter for “The Families of the Abductees”:

Thinking of Mother

It has been a long 25 years since I was separated from my mother. For these 25 years, I did nothing for her. My mother had a reputation of being a hard worker in our neighborhood. She is a quiet, patient, sensitive, independent, kind and strong mother.

When I was about 5, I went shopping with my mother to town. I begged for a new pair of shoes because my friend at kindergarten wore pretty shoes. She told me that she would buy a pair next time. I sat and cried in the middle of the street where a lot of people were passing by. I told mother that I was not going to go unless she bought me a pair. She bought ice cream instead, saying that she would buy a pair next time. I did not understand the concept of money at that time. As time goes by, now that I have my own family, I can understand what she was thinking about.

One day when I was about 11 years old and my sister was about 5, my mother fell from a large vehicle, hit her head and was taken to a hospital. When I heard the sad and surprising news, I cried as I worried about her. Two days after that day was Sunday. Since my mother was in the hospital, my father’s mother came to stay with us. It was very nice of her and we appreciated it. On Sunday, my sister and I did not have school. Knowing that my sister and I would love to see our mother, our grandmother thought about it hard and decided to hide our shoes, so that we could not visit our mother at the hospital.

I really wanted to see Mother because I would not have another chance until next weekend. My sister and I left our house barefoot only to see the face of our mother. We thought it was going to be close because it only took twenty-five minutes by car.

However, it was a very long way on foot. It took a long time because I brought 5-year old sister and we walked without shoes. We did not feel any pain and kept walking until we arrived at the hospital as we wanted to see our mother and we were worried about her. It was about 1:30 p.m.

We got to the hospital room of our mother on the 4th floor. She was very surprised to see us. She immediately asked us, "How did you get here?" I told her that we walked. She looked concerned although she wept with joy. My sister and I enjoyed talking with our mother, eating cookies. I felt relieved looking at her happy face.

A nurse walked us to the bus stop in front of the hospital. She found out that we walked barefoot from home. I asked her not to tell our mother. I do not think she knew about it. I was glad that she did not know because she would not worry so much. Once I got on the bus, I felt bad for our grandmother because she must have worried. When we got home, we told our grandmother what happened and apologized.

In the evening of Saturday, August 12, 1978, my mother and I went shopping to a store nearby. Since that night, I have not seen my mother. I spent 24 years thinking that she was fine in Japan. But she was not back in Japan. The fact that I cannot find her in Japan was so devastating that I could not describe it in words because I believed that Mother was in Japan. I kept thinking that I would see Mother as long as I returned to Japan.

Although I am back in Japan, my mother's fate remains unknown. Officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan showed me the pictures of Mother and me at a young age when they visited North Korea in September. I regret that I could not recognize the face on the picture although it was the face of my mother whom I love. It underscores the fact that 24 years are a really long time.

My father recently has dreams of my mother often; he started to believe that Mother would come back since his daughter came back.

The day will come when all of my loving family members will gather for fun and talk. I plan to do whatever I can for that happy day to come. I will not be able to do much, however, by myself. I will need strong help from all the people in Japan. I would like to ask for your warm support from the bottom of my heart.