

# Master Swordsman



Yoshi's grandfather, a *kendo* master of first rank, killed more than 30 Russian soldiers with a sword. That's the story told and written about Ginai Iizuka, the grand old man of Yoshi's childhood. Her brother, a retired Tokyo automotive executive, doesn't believe the story in its entirety, nor do I. After all, soldiers on both sides of the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War fought their bloody Manchurian battles with guns, not swords, and it seems unlikely that rifle-bearing Russians, attacking Japanese encampments, could fall in such numbers to a sword-wielding medical sergeant. Nevertheless, the story endures in the *kendo* literature of Japan, most prominently in books about Gunma Prefecture swordsmen, of whom Ginai was perhaps the best. The books are in Japanese, of course, and stupid me can't read them, but I have a good friend, Tokyo university professor Shozo Usami, who goes out of his way to educate me on any subject in which I am interested. In this case, I was interested in Ginai Iizuka (1876-1949), a prominent character in the *Bittersweet Journey* book I am writing for my dead daughter. Prior to Shozo's involvement, I knew only what Ginai's granddaughter — my wife Yoshi, my daughter Kei's mother — could recall about this first son of a country *samurai*. Ginai was born only three years after the Emperor *Meiji*, Hirohito's grandfather, abolished *samurai* titles and privileges as feudal Japan moved into the modern world. His father, Usaku Iizuka, was the last of the Iizukas of Komochi Village who could wear two swords in public and legally cut down a peasant showing insufficient respect. One must view the emperor's 1873 *samurai* demotions as a good start, wouldn't you say?



Ginai's granddaughter enters the Iizuka compound that looks not much different from Ginai's day. The gate house straight ahead has been refurbished, air-conditioned and all that. The big main house at left stands abandoned and shuttered while still housing family treasures. A sword with a blade measuring two feet and three inches was found here five years ago. It may have been Ginai's and was turned over to Yoshi's brother for safekeeping.

The Ginai Iizuka memorial at Komochi Village outside Shibukawa offers three monuments. The one shown below, in a photo I snapped in October 2000, is the largest. Its ideographic carvings identify Ginai Iizuka as a *kendo* “*hanshi*” master. *Hanshi* was the highest rank, and fewer than 20 *kendo* masters in all of Japan held it. A smaller monument, about six feet tall, listed dozens of disciples. An even smaller monument, about waist high, contained Ginai’s *jisei*, or death poem. It was raining that day, and Yoshi and our driver were not inclined to linger, but my hastily scribbled journal indicates that the poem might be translated thusly: “In the shadow of the moon, cherry blossoms scatter and die.” But in the end, as Shozo and Yoshi helped me parse the *jisei* characters, I settled on this: “A cherry blossom dies alone in the shadow of the moon, as do I, a single swordsman.” When I protested, saying there was nothing in the *jisei* sug-



gesting “I” or “swordsman,” I was told, as always in such cases, that I’m too literal-minded and will never understand the subtleties of Japanese poetry. Fair enough, I suppose, since I’ve never met a native Japanese who could deal professionally with the subtleties of English. The memorial plot lies across a road from a scholastic institute, the land for which Yoshi’s father donated long ago. The institute is owned and operated by Komochi Village and I assume this memorial to a distinguished resident is tended by the town as well. Amazingly, Yoshi had never before seen the monuments to her famous grandfather, and would not have seen them on this day if I hadn’t insisted we stop there. Yoshi’s three sisters, two of whom live in nearby Shibukawa, have not visited the memorial for many, many years, because they detest the way houses were built up close to it. Seldom does the past get enough space in the more crowded here and now.

To this very day, the Japanese people identify years by referring to the reigns of their emperors — for example, *Meiji* (1868-1912), *Taisho* (1912-1926), *Showa* (1926-1989) and *Heisei* (1989-Present). The Japanese understand our Gregorian calendar thoroughly, but among themselves they date events by numbering the years within an emperor’s reign. In books and other documents, it is reported that Ginai Iizuka was born in *Meiji* 9 (1876, January 15) and died “at the age of 74” in *Showa* 24 (1949, February 14). His death age is quoted here because it’s wrong as viewed from a Western perspective. Subtract 1876 from 1949 (a year in which Ginai had already celebrated a birthday) and you get 73, not 74. This “anomaly” has nothing to do with the calendar. Instead, it relates to the way ages were once calculated. Prior to the mid-20th century, every Japanese was considered one year old on the day he/she was born. It had to do with “emperor years.” Ginai was born in 1876 and turned two in 1877 because he had been alive within two years of the emperor’s reign. But for me, it complicates historical research. In general, a year must be subtracted from reported ages to be precise in the eyes of Western readers.

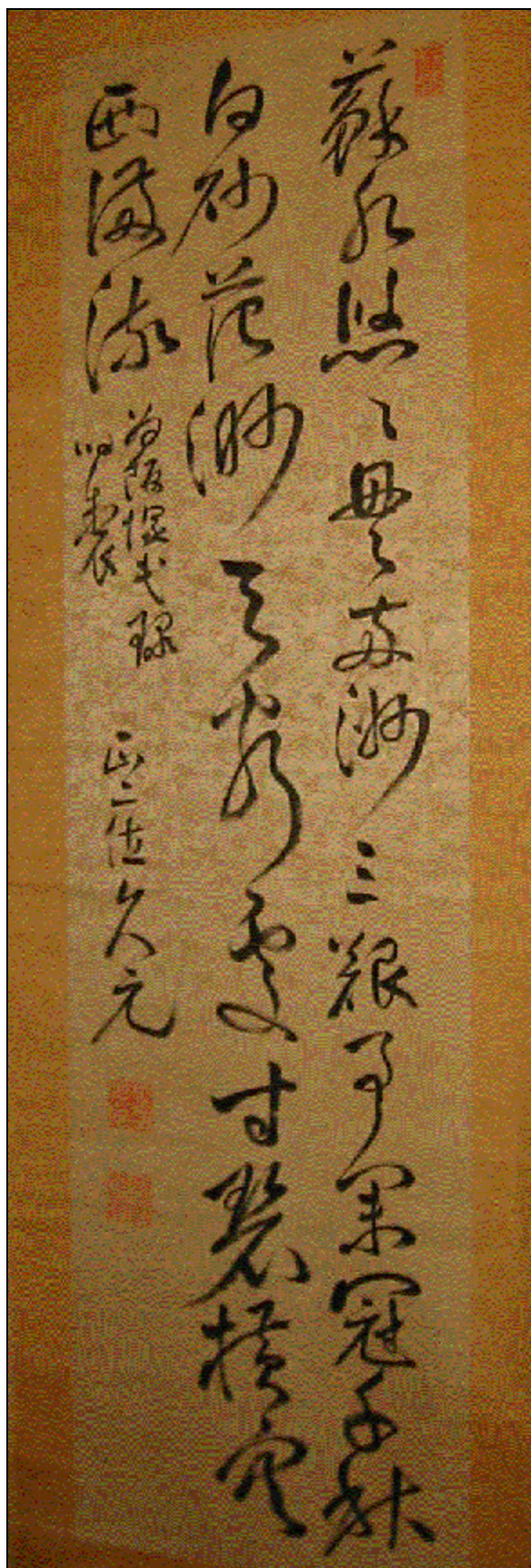
Yoshi remembers her grandfather as a dignified gentleman with huge handlebar mustaches, always impeccably dressed in Old Japan style, which essentially meant *kimono*. This grandfatherly image comes from the early 1940s, when Ginai was an old man and when Yoshi, just a child, lived at the Iizuka homestead in Gunma Prefecture's Komochi Village. Since Japanese fortunes always follow the oldest testosterone, Ginai had long ago inherited his birthright, a plantation operating in the *Gone With the Wind* style of the old American South. No slaves, of course, but plenty of sharecroppers who tended the crops and bowed low to the master in the big house on the hill, to whom they routinely delivered money for his purse and food for his kitchen. The plantation house and its gate house, both rising two stories on the bank of a stream, still stand at the Iizuka compound in the foothills of the Komochi Mountains. Prominent decades ago, but gone now, was Ginai's *kendo* studio spanning the stream. But Ginai wasn't around much. Instead, he was busy with his highly successful *kendo* school in Maebashi down the Tone River. Also, Maebashi was where he mostly lived, since the prefectural capital was where he established a home for his longtime mistress, who produced two or three offspring whom the legitimate Iizukas don't talk about. When Ginai came to the plantation, only a few times a month, he dined in solitary splendor in one room while the rest of his family dined in another. His estranged wife, Tori of the Inokuni family, stayed mostly alone in an attached house, poor discarded woman. As the grand old man entered the garden between the big house and the gate house, passing by a tortured black pine that looks today exactly as it looked then, he cleared his throat loudly. This was a signal for the entire household, ten or more people, to assemble at the doorway to greet him. Yoshi's father, Shigenobu Iizuka, Ginai's firstborn son, bowed him into the house, while the others lined up on their knees, foreheads nearly touching the *tatami* floor. Little Yoshi was permitted to ignore these orchestrated formalities. "Hi, Grandfather," she yelled, running to him. Stern-faced Ginai didn't smile much but he was pleased with his spoiled granddaughter, and he usually had candy for her, just for her, nobody else. With little effort, grandfathers can charm granddaughters, as I charmed my young daughter with a Tootsie Roll or something else left on her night stand after I got home late from the *Los Angeles Times*. Both Yoshi and Kei would remember these inconsequential treats for the rest of their lives.

In 1896 Ginai was sent to Formosa (now Taiwan) as a medical soldier of private rank during the Japanese occupation following the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War. He was only 20 years old and didn't know much, although he had taken up *kendo* sword fighting at the tender age of 16. By the time of the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War, when he was again sent overseas, Ginai was in his late 20s, a

mature and expert swordsman during a period when guns had made swords obsolete and mostly ceremonial. Nevertheless, when the Russians attacked, Medical Sergeant Ginai Iizuka grabbed his sword and became a legend, killing a number of enemy soldiers if not 30 or more. His reputation served him well for decades. He was a short and wiry man, but to be perceived as a giant killer is almost as good as being one. Within a decade of the victorious war, he showed his skills before the *Taisho* emperor, Hirohito's father. Those who faced him in *kendo* competitions described his style variously: "Like wind passing through willows" or, more often, "Like a stone wall." All of them believed this ying-and-yang approach, so difficult to broach, came from Ginai's fierce tooth-and-nail combat with Russians. He could not be taken lightly, and wasn't, but he almost always won. Finally, as ordained for every man, skilled or not, tragedy struck. Ginai suffered a stroke in 1938. Thereafter he walked with a cane and could no longer wield the bamboo *shinai* that substituted for a sword in *kendo* bouts. But he still taught, and was revered by hundreds of students who held him in awe. His last years could not have been happy ones. The great 1941-45 war with America had been lost, and Japan's final *shogun*, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, not only banned *kendo* but redistributed most of Ginai's lands to the farmers who actually worked them. Even today, a half century later, Yoshi resents this loss of family wealth. Across the Tone River from Komochi Village lies sizable acreage once owned by the Iizukas. With the help of modern technology, hot springs burst to the surface on that side of the river. It was like striking oil, or even better. *Onsen* facilities were built for a populace who could not immerse themselves too often and were eager to pay for the pleasure. "Peasants got rich!" exclaimed born-on-the-hill Yoshi, voicing the unthinkable.



At the Iizuka cemetery down the hill from the old family compound, Yoshi places fresh flowers at the tombstone of her grandparents, Ginai and Tori Iizuka. She does this and burns incense every time we visit the graves, which is every time we visit Japan. All whose ashes rest here, including her mother, father and elder brother, were Buddhists. Yoshi is the only Christian.



A large hanging scroll in my Lake Forest home has puzzled me for 30 something years. It has no pretty pictures like the other *kakemono* that Yoshi managed to shift from the old Iizuka compound to her new home in America. And the calligraphy is artistically cursive, making it difficult to read, even for Yoshi. I knew only that the scroll was given to *kendo* master Ginai Iizuka by someone important. Then the Usami brothers, Shozo in Tokyo and Masa in San Juan Capistrano, began looking at the characters and doing research. The calligrapher was Hisamoto Hijikata, a leader in the so-called *Meiji* Restoration of 1868, which took place before Ginai was even born. The Tokugawa shogunate, Japan's ruling body for 264 years, was overthrown, and the teenaged *Meiji* emperor, until then just a revered figurehead in Kyoto, was brought to Edo, which was renamed Tokyo. Some years later, Hisamoto served in the cabinet of Hirobumi Ito, Japan's first prime minister. Some years after that, in 1910 or a bit later, Hisamoto's scroll was presented to Ginai. By that time, the elder statesman was a major leader of Butokukai, the national martial arts association. As a *kendo* champion and "Way of the Sword" teacher, Ginai was a prominent member of the association, which encouraged traditional martial arts, including *judo*, bow and arrow, spear and bayonet. But there was nothing martial about the calligraphy that Hisamoto, then close to 80 years old, gave to Ginai, who was still in his 30s. It speaks of a Chinese city where white river sand stretches west to blue skies. A modern-day calligrapher, Masahiro Endo of Tokyo, deciphered the stylized Chinese characters, which gave Shozo and Masa a fair shot at translating them. I thanked the Usami brothers and Mr. Endo in an email: "Wow! You guys have done a great service for me and Yoshi. You have researched and explained a hanging scroll that has been a semi-puzzle to us for decades. Now, when guests are being shown things in our home, I can say casually: 'Oh, that's Chinese calligraphy by a *Meiji*-era Japanese statesman that was presented nearly 100 years ago to Yoshi's grandfather, a master swordsman. Friends translated it for us.'"