

Chushingura

Forty-Seven Loyal Samurai

Let me tell you the best Japanese story I know. It's a true story that happened three centuries ago. Each time I return to Japan, I learn or see something that adds to this fascinating tale. My autumn 2003 visit was no different. In December, in bustling 21st century Tokyo, I walked the path of ancient, righteous warriors who, in 1702, took a well-protected lord's head in a vendetta still glorified in Japanese books, theater and television. But first, an overview of the story, as recounted in my 1999 journal, which stems from my first visit to Japan as an old man. As always, my Japan journals, collectively entitled *Bittersweet Journey*, are addressed to my dead daughter, and when I mention Jack instead of Jackson, I am referring to the young man who would become her father. Jack was a boy she knew only from Jackson's writings, but she preferred him, as do I.

Wednesday, Sept. 29, 1999: Yoshi and I visited Sengakuji Temple, where Japan's famous 47 *ronin* of Ako have been resting in peace for nearly 300 years alongside the tomb of Lord Asano. I had not been there since the early Sixties, when young Yoshi guided Jack to this small but popular temple in Tokyo's Takanawa district.

It is difficult to find only a few words to tell this epic Japanese story, which epitomizes *Bushido*, the "Way of Warriors" philosophy that defined the spirit of



Jackson and his daughter Yvonne Keiko Sellers

samurai for centuries, before and after the 47 *ronin* thrilled the nation with their vendetta. So I won't even try. I will let the words flow. I once thought I would write a whole book about it, but I got busy with things like marriage and fatherhood and making a living, so I never did.

My book, to be entitled *47 Warriors* or *47 Ronin* or something similar, would have told the tale in English to a fascinated Western world, as my youthful fantasies dictated at that long-ago

time. My research — perhaps I should say Jack’s research — was left behind when I departed Japan 34 years ago, caught up as I was in more important affairs. Jack would say the world lost a great book. Jackson smiles in fond contempt of his egotistical youth.

Kei, you know the story, because you heard me outline it in reference to my decades-old Oishi Kuranosuke *hakata* doll, which you purloined as an attractive conversation piece for your San Diego apartment many years ago. Perhaps you liked the doll because it belonged to Jack, who was more interesting than Jackson. I retrieved the intricately decorated plaster-of-Paris figurine for safe-keeping when we closed your apartment several months before you died. It was too delicate to be put into storage along with the rest of your possessions.

Both feet on the 12-inch-high doll were broken in your care, but I repaired them as best I could, and the doll stands now in your old room at our Lake Forest home, complete with the long and short swords of the traditional *samurai* warrior of olden times. It is an idealized version of Oishi, patterned after the larger-than-life statue that rises majestically at the gate to Sengakuji Temple. In truth, Oishi was homely, even ugly, but his legions of Japanese fans prefer to see him as handsome, and thus he will always be.

Let’s set the stage. It is almost 300 years ago, the 14th year of the peaceful Genroku era, or 1701 as Westerners calculate calendar years. The seat of national power is Edo, which will become Tokyo in about seven more generations. A *Shogun*, or barbarian-conquering generalissimo, rules the country, which has been unified and mostly peaceful for nearly a hundred years. His *daimyo*, or feudal lords, more than 200 of them, hold fiefdoms from one end of Japan to the other. All are *samurai*, members of the ruling warrior class, and all employ lesser *samurai* to protect their castle towns and administer the affairs of Tokugawa government. All of them, lords and retainers alike, pay ceremonial homage to the essentially powerless Emperor in Kyoto near Osaka.

West of Kyoto, about 385 miles from Edo, lies the sleepy Ako castle town ruled by the popular Lord Asano Naganori. His chief councilor, Oishi, is destined to become the primary hero of this tale, which eventually will be called



Jack’s and Kei’s and Jackson’s Oishi *hakata* doll, with its damaged feet.

Chushingura, as taken from the title of a famous and highly successful puppet play written in the mid-1700s. If we need a modern American analogy, this one might shape up thusly: Edo was Washington/New York, while Kyoto/Osaka was Chicago, and Lord Asano was mayor of St. Louis, silly as that sounds.

The Ako lord was called to Edo to participate in ceremonies involving an annual visit by envoys of the Emperor. He was to take instruction from Lord Kira Yoshinaka, the grand master of ceremonies at the capital, and that was where the trouble started.

Every book about Japan must, at some point, make a tiresome explanation of Japanese proper names. Discerning readers like you, Kei, will notice my sudden switch to the Japanese style of rendering names. By tradition, family names come before given names. This is as true today as it was 300 years ago, or a thousand years ago for that matter. Your late grandfather, scion of the Iizuka clan in the Komochi Mountains, was Iizuka Shigenobu. Your mother, before she married Jack, was Iizuka Yoshiko. Your cousin, the Japanese paratrooper, is Sergeant First Class Iizuka Yasuki. Likewise, 300 years ago, it was Kira Yoshinaka, not Yoshinaka Kira. Throughout this book, I render the names of 20th century people in the Western manner — Shigenobu Iizuka, Yoshiko Iizuka, Yasuki Iizuka — while rendering the names of historical personages in the proper way. Tokugawa Ieyasu, who unified Japan 400 years ago and established the longstanding Tokugawa Shogunate, cannot be called Ieyasu Tokugawa. It just doesn't sound right, and I am too much of a Japanese to permit it in any book I write.

By all accounts, Lord Kira was a greedy peacock puffed up with his own importance. He was a *hatamoto*, a high-ranking *samurai* bureaucrat whose income was less than half that of the *daimyo* to whom he gave ceremonial instruction. He expected expensive gifts, bribes really, from lords who sipped from his cup of knowledge and thereby learned where to stand, what to do and what to say when the Emperor's representatives entered the Grand State Hall in Edo Castle, the very heart of Tokugawa Shogunate government.

Lord Asano, performing this rather onerous duty for the first time, was surprised, even shocked, to discover that another *daimyo*, younger and less wealthy, had bestowed on Kira gifts of enormous value. Asano was atuned to the imperial niceties of Kyoto rather than the political culture of Edo. He consulted with high officials. *Was such generosity expected of him? If so, he could easily afford it. He was just a country boy who wanted to do things right in the big city.* “No, no, no,” he was told. “Government officials don't take bribes.”

Politicians are the same around the world. They always deny culpability as they continue to do culpable things. So Asano, naive to the point of stupidity, gave the greedy Kira a box of dried bonito, a traditional gift of respect between equals. One would smile cynically if the consequences were not so tragic. In unsophisticated innocence, Asano had sewn the seeds of his own destruction, his house's extinction and his most loyal soldiers' deaths.

Kira, spiteful in his disappointment, made Asano's life miserable. He ignored the Lord of Ako while showing elaborate favoritism to the young *daimyo* who had paid the expected bribe. When the frustrated Asano gritted his teeth and politely asked a question or two, he was answered with imperious scorn only slightly veiled as condescension. Finally, on the very day the imperial envoys were to arrive at Edo Castle, Kira issued one taunt too many, this one in the presence of the junior *daimyo*.

Ignited by embarrassment, Asano's bottled-up rage exploded. He drew his sword and slashed his tormentor. In petrified horror, Kira froze like a frightened rabbit, which probably saved his life. Any movement at this time surely would have been fatal. An angry *samurai* lord acting in defense of his dignity figured to be the last thing Kira would ever see on this earth.

Instead, as Asano tensed to deliver the mortal blow, he managed to jerk himself back from madness. The sight of the cringing bureaucrat, an obviously unworthy foe, brought him to his senses. He lowered his sword in the instant and certain knowledge that his grand life was over. He had drawn a weapon in anger at Edo Castle, even spilling blood. There was no going back, and he quietly and unrepentantly accepted his fate.

The *Shogun*, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, the fifth to hold the title since Tokugawa Ieyasu founded the dynasty, was outraged. The sentence was swift and sure. Death for Asano, abolishment of the house of Asano, confiscation of Ako Castle and all Asano lands. The lord would die, and his family and 300 retainers would be left in ruins. So decreed the *Shogun*, and so it would be. Asano was escorted to an Edo mansion to await execution that very day. He was transported in a net-covered palanquin like a common criminal.

After a short ceremony in which a government official solemnly sentenced Asano to *seppuku*, the lord was led to a garden, where all preparations had been made. This alone was a departure from custom. Never before had a *daimyo* been required to commit suicide in the open air. But it was not a time for protest. It was time to die, after only 34 summers. Asano calmly sat on rug-covered matting, surrounded by cherry trees in fading bloom. He asked for paper and a writing brush, and he composed his death poem.

*Frailer far than the tender flowers
That are soon scattered by the wind,
Must I now bid a last farewell
And leave the genial spring behind?*

The answer to his poetic question was yes. The next *seppuku* step called for Asano to take a dagger and stab himself in the belly, the center of one's soul as Japanese then believed. He was not expected to actually kill himself. As soon as honor was satisfied with the shedding of blood by his own hand, an executioner standing behind him would lop off his head with a long sword. But when Asano merely reached for the dagger, the executioner reacted prematurely, slicing off the lord's head before honorable blood could be spilled. It was the final, intolerable disgrace. Asano had not only been goaded into a criminal act punishable by death and loss of his estates, but his *seppuku* was botched.

Asano's retainers pondered the matter. With the death of their lord, they were now masterless *samurai*, or *ronin* as masterless *samurai* were called, and they had to abandon Ako Castle and scratch out livings elsewhere. The more they thought about it, the madder they got. Under the leadership of their chief, Oishi, they plotted revenge on Lord Kira, who still lived and enjoyed himself while their master lay in his tomb.

Lord Kira was no fool. He suspected as much. To throw Kira's spies off guard, Oishi divorced his wife and pretended to be a drunkard and womanizer, a worthless ex-*samurai*. On his orders, the swords of his loyal followers were allowed to get rusty, an unpardonable sin. *Samurai* from other clans, smug in their assumed superiority, figuratively and literally spat on the Ako soldiers. One of these scornful swordsmen would later kill himself in atonement before the tombstone of the Ako *ronin* he insulted. *Samurai* did things like that in those days.

The clay feet of our heroes always fascinate us. Their weaknesses, real or imagined, make them more human and we feel closer somehow. George Washington's alleged marijuana cultivation, Thomas Jefferson's slave mistress, Bill Clinton's succulent intern and Oishi Kuranosuke's blatant debauchery. Japanese historians still debate the latter. Was Oishi truly faking it when he drank and whored around while planning the avenging strike on Kira? Was it all a charade to lull the powerful lord into sleepy overconfidence, or was it simpler than that? Perhaps Oishi just loved hot sakè and golden geisha asses, and the vendetta, with death waiting at the end, offered a good excuse for indulging himself

while he still could.

It was even suggested that the 18th century playwrights who fashioned the famous “Chushingura” puppet play nearly a half century after Oishi went to his grave were no different than their 20th century counterparts. Free at last to tell the story in the flimsy disguise of fiction, they quite naturally sought a commercial success. Oishi’s scandalous behavior would be more theatrically appealing if he were furthering the vendetta, rather than merely gratifying his primal urges. In Japan or America, if legend doesn’t match history or common sense, go with the legend, which always rings true, especially if it has been repeated often enough. But in the end, what does it really matter? Around the wide world and through the human ages, military officers excessively fond of wine, women and song have distinguished themselves in battle. The character flaw, if that’s what it is, does not relate to heroism.

In December 1702, during dark wee hours in snow-covered Edo, the loyal band of Ako *ronin*, now reduced to only 47, attacked Kira’s mansion under Oishi’s personal leadership. With their freshly sharpened and gleaming swords, they killed 17 of Kira’s guardsmen, while sparing the women and servants. Although readily available, firearms were not used, because this was not the “Way of Warriors.” Surprisingly, after this pitched battle in dark interiors and court-yards, all the *ronin* were still alive, although several were wounded.

The *ronin* searched the huge mansion and seized the cowardly Lord Kira found hiding in a charcoal shed, and summarily beheaded him. Carrying Kira’s bagged head atop a spear, they crossed Edo’s Sumida River and marched about six miles to Sengakuji Temple. They carefully washed the head at the temple’s well. Then they presented the presentable head while kneeling before the tomb of Lord Asano, who had been dead and buried for a year and nine months. Some sobbed, unable to hold back their emotions. *Master, you have been avenged!* Immediately afterward, they surrendered to authorities and were lodged under house arrest at the mansions of various *daimyo* in Edo. As a precursor to the post-mortem reverence that would come, they were treated more like honored guests than prisoners awaiting sentencing.

Politically, the all-powerful Tokugawa Shogunate found itself in an unaccustomed semi-tough spot. As gossip does in every capital of the world, the news spread like wildfire in the city of Edo. And Edo was not a small city even then. Its population totaled well more than a million. People high and low saw the 47 *ronin* as heroes, admirably loyal to their wronged lord at a time when traditional values seemed to be crumbling. These men did more than mouth platitudes! They were

gishi, or “righteous warriors,” acting in the finest tradition of *samurai*.

In Shogunate circles and even common bathhouses, debates over the appropriate fate of Oishi and his soldiers were passionate. But after all was said and considered, authorities were left with the undeniable fact that a serious crime had been committed. A public official had been assassinated. So the 47 *ronin* of Ako were sentenced to death.

One by one the *ronin* ceremoniously killed themselves, committing *seppuku* on a grand scale. *Life is light as a feather, duty is heavy as a mountain*. This *samurai* incantation was still recited more than 200 years later by *kamikaze* pilots flying dutifully to their deaths in attacks on American warships. All the Ako *ronin* died except a young man whom Oishi dispatched to report the victory to the beautiful Lady Asano and others of the dispersed clan. The warriors were buried in neat rows next to Lord Asano’s Sengakuji tomb.

When the young messenger returned to the capital and announced he was ready to join his comrades in martyrdom, the government said “Forget it,” because public feelings on the matter were running too high. *Let’s get this affair behind us. Go away!* So the 47th member of the band lived to the ripe age of 82, honored throughout his long life. Today his remains lie elsewhere, but his tombstone stands proud with the others at Sengakuji. After all, he was one of the famous 47.

The museum at Sengakuji, next to the graveyard, contains clothing worn by the Ako *ronin*, statues of each of them, weapons, battle armor, letters and poems written by Oishi and others. In the cemetery itself, the tombs of Lord Asano and his lady rise large and prominent as befits their rank, and the smaller tombstones of Asano’s loyal soldiers stand alongside in military order. Incense still burns, blanketing the monuments with wisps of pungent smoke. Flowers are still placed, especially at the corner tombs of Oishi, the admired 45-year-old leader, and his 16-year-old son, the youngest of the 47. And one *ronin* known for his fondness for *sakè* still has a fresh cup. All of this after three centuries.

Someone who doesn’t know me well might think that I, an American with little direct contact with Japan for decades, would be required to do huge amounts of research to even outline the story of the 47 *ronin* of Ako. Actually not, or hardly not. The tale is very familiar to me, and not just because I did considerable research as a young man named Jack. The Japanese themselves never tire of the *Chushingura* drama with its huge cast of characters and intricate plot twists.

Each of the *ronin*, ranging in age from 16 to 76, has his own story to tell, and that story may focus peripherally on his wife and/or lover, his son and/or daughter, his mother, his father, or still other influences that might have pulled

him away from fatal duty but did not. Many movies, television shows and books, recounting the vendetta from beginning to end, are produced in Japan for an eager audience. To this day, the famous *kabuki* play “Kanadehon Chushingura” is performed in Tokyo annually, beginning on December 14, the anniversary of Kira’s beheading, and continuing until year’s end. Since I am a Japanese by marriage, much of this has rubbed off on me over the decades.

Fast forward to the spring of Year 2000. Kei, you didn’t think I was writing the entirety of *Bittersweet Journey’s* Part I in 1999, did you? A book like this, chronological in essence as I explore your maternal homelands, inevitably draws ideas and information from numerous sources. As I was working on the book one Saturday night in Lake Forest in Year 2000, Yoshi called up to my above-the-garage workshop: “*Chushingura* is on!” So I stopped what I was doing, powered up the 25-inch TV set I inherited from you, and switched to Cox Cable Channel 12. There was the 43rd weekly episode of a series called *Genroku Ryoran*, or “Peaceful Blossoms in Turmoil,” complete with English subtitles so that American ignoramuses like me could follow it.

The 47 *ronin* of Ako are approaching that snow-blanketed December night when they will take Lord Kira’s head. The whole thing is Shakespearean in scope. I know what’s going to happen, but I can’t wait until next Saturday, and the one after that, and the one after that. We Japanese, even adopted Japanese like me, don’t want the epic to end, but when it finally does, we are comforted by the certainty that another version will come soon.

There were only two times in Japanese history when *Chushingura*, or “Treasury of Loyal Retainers,” could not be told and retold. First, the Shogunate government of the early 18th century would not allow it, even when the story was related as fiction, because it threatened the established order. Second, General Douglas MacArthur, Japan’s final “*Shogun*,” banned it outright during the American military occupation after World War II, because it might threaten the desired postwar order.

It was said that a jingoistic Japanese rice farmer, predictably respectful of those in charge, gave his opinion of MacArthur the *Shogun*: “Emperor Hirohito couldn’t have chosen a better man.” According to the general’s staff, the *Chushingura* tale glorified militarism and was feudalistic in its endorsement of such outmoded concepts as honor and loyalty. But despite all that, the story survives in the hearts of Japanese everywhere, and is told and retold still.