

interview with YOSHIKAWA SENSEI

The 29th of April was a busy day. The SENSEI was receiving calls and guests while preparing for the festive congratulations that would soon visit upon his evening. This day, Emperor had bestowed the KUN GOTO ZUIHO-SHO medal of recognition for his lifelong service to Japan in preserving its history and culture. But through all the bustle and preparation, he found time for a talk...

SS When comparing the HOZON-KAI or NTHK as a non-profit organization, the NBTHK or NIHON BIJUTSU TOKEN HOZON KYOKAI seems especially famous overseas.

Y Yes, but our HOZON-KAI was established in October of MEIJI 44 (1912) and we already have over 70 years to our history.

SS I see, it's become the oldest sword organization in the world.

Y Yes, there were several organizations; like the HOZON-KAI or CHU-O TOKEN-KAI, etc, following WWII. The present NBTHK was established by the way these groups combined.

Around SHOWA 44 (1969), with the NBTHK comfortably stable, I returned to the former HOZON-KAI.

SS SENSEI, were you brought up in the environment of the sword?

Y My family ancestry is TOGISHI (sword polishers). My father was TOGISHI and took part in the caring of the swords and ceremonial swords of the Imperial Household. I also took over that duty. This is natural for the family of TOGISHI.

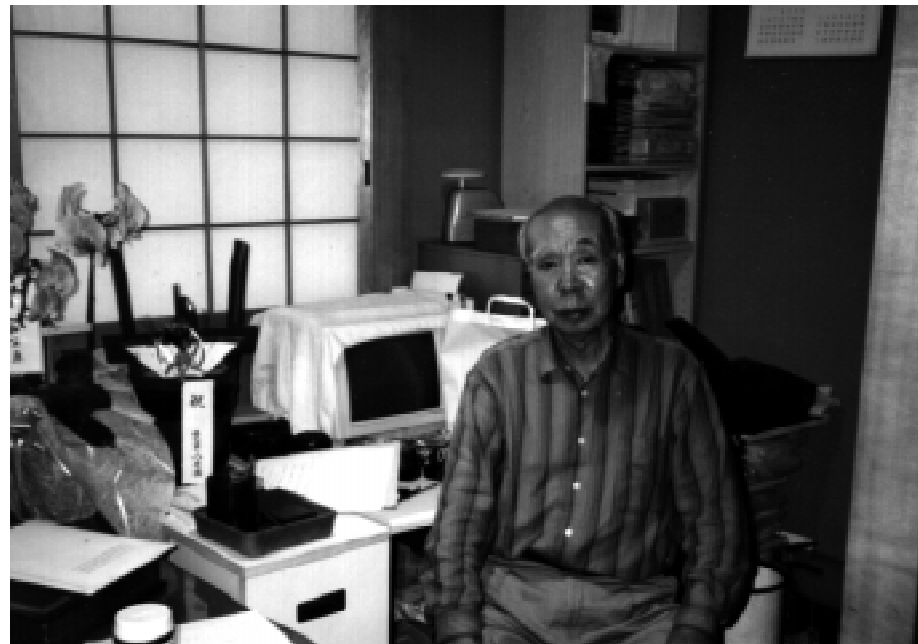
SS I see, as a connoisseur, SENSEI's family was ideal.

Today, I would like to talk about the way of KANTEI (judgement). I think, sometimes, it is hard to judge a MUMEI or unknown old swords.

Y You must judge the JI-DAI and DEMPO 伝法 "way of great teaching"¹ such as GOKADEN, etc. We must get the point² with MUMEI swords.

SS note: ¹Appraisal classifications, such as GOKADEN or the "Five Schools," are long held definitions or teachings and their use as an appraisal "tool" is called DEMPO.

² To "get the point" talks about coming to an understanding of the appropriate appraisal classification, such as GOKADEN.



Gift SAKE and well-wishes crowd his desk on an evening of deserved celebration

SS Dependent on the way of judgement, the value and the sword itself would be different, isn't it?

Y Of course, (for real judgement), we must look at the sword evenly (without bias), and also, an accumulation of long acquired knowledge and experience. The humanity of the judge is important, too. He cannot change his opinion of a MUMEI sword depending on the owner.

Because there are dealers or collectors in reliance on the KANTEI paper, we must draw out more accurate and exacting answer owing to the fact that the economic value would be so different. Also, I think that looking at many MEITO 名刀 (superior or "name" swords) is very important. Because we can't tell about MEITO without looking, actually.

SS Many people imagine that the price will be different depending on the KANTEI papers.

Y Well, not all swords shall be papered when people ask us for judgement. However, we would let them know the result of judgement. KANTEI paper is not always issued, - only to swords that have passed. Although, to our HOZON-KAI, around 70 to 80 swords arrive from people all over the world. Only about half, of these numbers of swords, pass.

Y If a sword fails, we will let the owner know why it could not pass, or how old it is and if it belongs to a particular school or lineage. Also, if the owner of a piece were to pass away, the KANTEI paper tells the bereaved what kind of sword, or how valuable the sword is that he left as a keepsake. It is written very clearly.

SS I see, so many people choose the judgement at HOZON-KAI rather than the NBTHK! Do you know this?

Y I think this is because the judge certainly put their stamps on the KANTEI paper as, "I surely judge this sword on this date."

SS Yes, definitely, I can't see who judged and decided this KANTEI from NBTHK.

Y Well, one reason I quit the NBTHK... - however, I also used to be a judge of NBTHK, - There used to be two different SHINSA, the head-office SHINSA and the local or district SHINSA. And someone did random... (pause) SHINSA at some local districts. Of course, because they did not put stamps on the papers, (people) can't tell who made the judgement for this KANTEI. I thought this was not right. So, I quit (as) the judge of the NBTHK.

SS About when was this, SENSEI?

Y I think it was around SHOWA 32 (1957) or 33. Later then, for the purpose of judgement, with my faith, I began to be a judge of HOZON-KAI; - which has a long history of judgement.

SS I think it is a courageous action to issue the KANTEI with one's own name, because it will decide someone's property-value.

Y Yes, we are not allowed an improper job, at least I have belief (have faith) in this. I don't think humans are 100%, but we don't make any doubtful KANTEI.

SS I still think some unknown, or little known sword smith made MU-MEI, how do you know?

Y I can tell JIDAI first. Also, that unknown smith tried to create the sword under the model sword which he learned. Further, the model sword must have been created before him. So, we could follow the line. I recognize a slight potential for aberration in MUMEI, but we

never mistake swords with signature. Moreover, from the ancient times, old masters started to research the learnings of sword from late-KAMAKURA to NAMBOKUCHO. There were sword books that had been in existence. I don't image some great smiths are lost from history. If he had a high enough level of technique, he must be known in some way. For example, there is a potential that a smith had craftsmanship, but after his time as an apprentice with the great master, might go to some local mountain and be buried there. However, wherever he had been, his created swords tell us the characteristics or the way (of forging).

SS I see, how do I think about GIMEI?

Y Well, there are several kinds of GIMEI. When they send GIMEI sword, - as I told you before, - we would let them know why it was wrong, how old or what kind of level the smith was who made the sword. More, this wrong signature was cut later from when the sword was created or was it created on the purpose (as a fraud) from the first. Or, there is DAI-SAKU and DAI-MEI 代作, 代銘.

(SS note: Swords made or signed under the direction of the master) We admit these.

SS As the same work of the smith?

Y Forging of swords is impossible by oneself. There is master, and MUKOUZUCHI hammer. It is group work of, usually, three or four smiths. When the master was getting too old, when young ability was getting to grow and could do the good work, - but it is hard work for the old master.

For instance, in the inscription, there is a long signature cut as stating his age as 85 years. Because it is obviously impossible to forge swords for this 85 years old man, under the master's guidance, the most skilled disciple would create the sword and cut the signature. This, we call, DAI-SAKU and DAIMEI. Also, it is clearly the same craft work because the work is group work. The meaning of GIMEI is that it was created in a different time by a different party.



When a sword smith was ordered to make a sword, he made his disciple create that sword with him. Because of this, the sword was produced in the same group craft house, yet the master cut his signature. (When) we look (at the signature), it is the same. Next, we must look at the result - superior or ordinary? This (superior work or ordinary) is the differential of market price.

SHOSHIN (speaks to a deeper sense than mere signature validity) not only to know of GIMEI or genuine signature, but knowing good or bad for the name of the smith. This is important to find the price of the sword.

Like KOTETSU, I think there are too many KOTETSUs that are said good (signature), though I can tell, obviously, many are not good, or made by his students.

I don't think a man who became a sword smith after he was 50 years old could create so many - several hundred swords.

In the judgement of KANTEI, the easiest (to judge) but must hold most responsible is the first class sword. It can't be allowed mistake. Value (for all

transactions) would change depending on KANTEI.

ss I would like to ask you, frankly, are there any GIMEI swords among KOKUHO National Treasures?

Y Well, after the World War II, around SHOWA 26, they changed the system of KOKUHO.

ss umm... how did they change it?

Y Consequently, however, before the World War II, there was two kinds of decision, KOKUHO and JUYO BIJUTSU HIN, by the Ministry of Education. Then, at SHOWA 26, they withdrew all KOKUHO and JUYO BIJUTSU HIN and made a new system, KOKUHO and JUYO BUNKAZAI. At that time, they shook off and re-arranged all those doubtful swords. But before that time, I think

there were many.

ss Yes, certainly the swords used to be called KYU 旧 KOKUHO (old National Treasure), but there is no title like that now.

Y The meaning of KYU-KOKUHO is which had been withdrawn. Now, many of them became JUYO BUNKAZAI. Then, among the withdrawn swords, the real superior swords were decided as KOKUHO. Also, there are swords that became JUYO BUNKAZAI from among the JUYO BIJUTSU HIN. The reason why they chose to try to change the system is - especially like the Imperial House, temple or Shrine respected the history or source rather than the workmanship itself. In the cases where there was more history on the blade, they were appointed as KOKUHO. But on SHOWA 26, they arranged everything. So, I think the KOKUHOs that were arranged later, should be real fine arts. - But might be some potential rest they could not shake off quite so perfectly (laugh). So, anyway, they did it.

ss How do they appoint KOKUHO now?

Y Well, however, there are jurors (or judges) and, especially, no one is decided as a member for the judges of the KOKUHO or JUBUN from the sword society. When sword came up for judgement, our sword society appointed someone to judge. And we, sword society may be at a disadvantage to decide the KOKUHOs (laughter). Also, I think the number of swords for KOKUHO are so exhausted (there) almost (isn't any) anymore. Or when HOMMA-SAN (Dr Honma Kunzan) used to be a judge for KOKUHO, I believe they judged many at a time, but in the future, I guess, the swords to come up to KOKUHO would be really rare.

ss I have read a story of someone's book, the writer seems that he doubts the KOKUHO DOJI-GIRI YASUTSUNA in the UENO Museum.

Y The name "DOJI-GIRI" comes from the story of SHUTEN-DOJI being cut by the YASUTSUNA blade. But there is no such historical fact. MINAMOTO RAIKO cut SHUTEN-DOJI. It is a story of an anecdote or legend. Also, there are several swords that are called "DOJI-GIRI."

YOSHIKAWA SENSEI

NIHON TOKEN HOZON-KAI

SS Several?

Y Yes, also, the KOGARASU-MARU, which is appointed as GY-OBUTSU. There are about three KOGARASU actually now. I saw one at the Imperial House Agency because I go to care for the swords there. According to old books, that sword is the example of the extant signature of AMAKUNI. When I put the OSHIGATA on the tang, it fit perfectly! However, I could not find the traces of signature. They sat on the OSHIGATA, but not on the sword. I must have tried to find too well (small laugh)! Also, there is another KOGARASU in the KOKUBUNJI at HIDA. By the way, I also saw this one.

SS Is that also KOKUHO?

Y No, it hasn't been appointed KOKUHO. Also, GYOBUTSU KOGARASU is the oldest, I think. There are several swords that exist like that among these famous swords. In addition to these, for instance, MINAMOTO YOSHITSUNE owned a TACHI which is named, "USU-MIDORI" or Shallow Green. That sword changed the number of nicknames, depending on the owner, like as became HIGEKIRI, "The Beard Cutter." Even though it is said there were 4 swords used, sometimes it was actually only one sword that had several different names.

SS I see, so how can we find the value of a Japanese sword?

Y It is a difficult question. I think the value of a sword is the importance to the man rather than the market value. If it was GIMEI, the sword is very important for the family or individual.

This is a story of when I was young. There was a man, whose name is Horikiri Zenjiro, who used to be a mayor of Tokyo when it was called a city. Then, he became the Chief Secretary of the Cabinet...

SS Yes, he is famous...

Y From the time of his father, we polished his swords, - long time. Then, one day, Mr Horikiri brought two TANTOs for polishing.

One was wonderful work but was not a top class smith, The other one was about the same length, the name was RAI KUNIMITSU of GIMEI. He asked me to polish the blades and make SHIRA-SAYA. So I answered "Yes." Then he goes, "How much for the work?" I recommended to him, that it would be better to use 10 Yen, the rate of the time for a good one. So I continued, "We may talk about half price for the one that has no-good signature." He said, "Wait" - then - "Because you praised the first TANTO, I hope the work of 10 Yen. The other TANTO, which you said has no good signature, although I was told the same thing by everybody, I want you to do the work more than 10 Yen. Because the sword is no substitute for our Horikiri family."

So, at that time, I realized (how) the importance of a sword can be differently placed... rather than I had thought.

SS Waa...

Y Rather than there is flow, GIMEI or history, I think the importance of the sword is how it is precious and noble for the people.

YOSHIKAWA SENSEI

Mr Yoshikawa was born in Tokyo on September 13th, TAISHO 10. He came from a long line of polishers. His grandfather worked for the MORI family. They have carried the responsibility from father to son for the care and upkeep of the swords of the Imperial House.

BUNKA-SHO NIHONTO TOROKU, SHINSA-IN

Head of the NIHON TOKEN HOZON-KAI

KUN GOTO ZUIHO-SHO holder