

1. My Father's Rice Exchange Failure

In a sense, most of my childhood was one long apprenticeship. My family experienced various difficulties for most of that period, and as a result I have few happy memories and many of hardship. But let us start at the beginning.

I was born in November 1894 in Wasamura, a village less than ten kilometers east of Wakayama, five minutes' walk from Senda railway station on the JR Wakayama Line. My family had no illustrious ancestry to boast of, but prided itself on a long history of residence in the village. We were in the upper stratum of village society, and this meant having the means to send my eldest brother to middle school, the only one in the whole prefecture. My father spent most of his time attending village assembly meetings or involved in community affairs. As the youngest of eight children, I was the most indulged and doted upon. My early childhood was peaceful



Birthplace in Wakayama Prefecture



Gate of childhood home

and carefree. I dimly remember going fishing in nearby streams, playing tag, and drowsing happily while being carried home on my nurse's back along the paddy field pathways to the comforting sound of a country lullaby. Memories like these are among my few happy recollections of childhood.

But the idyll was short-lived.

When I was six, my father went bankrupt. At the time, the Wakayama area was participating in the ripples of industrial prosperity that followed Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War. A rice exchange was set up in Wakayama and a rush of speculation ensued. My father had a penchant for trying out anything new, and he began to frequent the rice exchange to speculate on the commodity market. He failed completely. In practically no time, his adventures took away our family property, including the house passed down from our ancestors and the farmland we owned. We left Wasamura and moved to Wakayama. With the help of a clog dealer who was a friend, my father opened a shop that sold wooden clogs (*geta*). My eldest brother had only one year to go before graduation, but he was forced to leave school and help at the store.

The clog business did not last long. In little more than two years the shop had to be closed, and the family's financial

difficulties grew progressively worse. My father tried one job after another in an attempt to provide for our immediate needs. But one misfortune is often followed by another. In 1901, my eldest brother died. He had found a job as a clerk at the newly opened Wakayama Spinning Mill, but after three months of deteriorating illness he was gone. Then my other brother and one of my older sisters also died, no doubt from some infectious disease for which there was no ready cure in those days.

It was during this family crisis that I entered a primary school in Wakayama. When I was in second grade, my father left alone for Osaka to look for work. He found a job involving clerical work and miscellaneous duties at a privately run school for the visually and hearing impaired that had just opened there, and from his meager salary he sent money regularly to those of us remaining in Wakayama. Life was poor, but finally somewhat more stable.

Then one day in the fall of my fourth year in primary school—when I was close to completing the four years of education compulsory at that time—a letter came from my father. “Konosuke is soon to graduate, but a charcoal brazier dealer, a good and kind man named Miyata, needs an apprentice. This is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss, so send Konosuke up to Osaka right away.” This arrangement was soon settled, and in late November 1904, my mother took me to Kinokawa Station, at the time a station on the Nankai Line, to see me off. She put me on the train and asked some of the other passengers to look after me until I reached Osaka.

Her tearful words of caution and encouragement about the life I was to face in the city, and the excitement of getting on a train for the first time in my life, still come back to me vividly.

And so my entry into society began as an apprentice at a *hibachi* shop. As a beginner, my job, when not watching over the proprietor's children or doing odd jobs and cleaning, was to polish the *hibachi*. For the finest quality *hibachi*, I might spend an entire day polishing with the rush stalks, until my tender hands were scratched and swollen all over. In no time at all, my hands began to sting terribly in the mop water when I scrubbed the floors each morning.

But it was the loneliness that I found hardest to bear. At night after the shop closed and I would go to bed, I could not help crying my eyes out while thinking of my mother and family. Perhaps back then I was a bit of a crybaby.