

The Society of the Sacred Heart in the Far East 1908-1980

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After the stormy closing of the House in Shanghai came a tranquil beginning in a rural setting, Susono. The year of the foundation, 1952, was the centenary of the death of Blessed Philippine, and Fuji Noen, as it was first called, was placed under her patronage. She whose out-look on the world had been shaped by Alpine horizons would feel at home here; on one side, across the valley, rose the Hakone Mountains and above the long slopes on the other rose Mount Fuji. One of the vast tea plantations which Mrs. Iwashita had deeded to her daughters at the close of the war had passed into the hands of the Society at her death in 1946, through Mother Kiyoko. The elder sister did not wish to keep her share and it was sold to the Society, which thus came into possession of the whole of the beautiful property.

Mother Duchesne would also have been pleased with the work already begun in these lovely surroundings. On a wooded space near the Kise river was a cluster of buildings: the elder Iwashita was a man whose ideal was “to serve heaven” by living in justice, peace and charity. He had built this school near his own home, and brought in teachers from Sano. His son, Father Soichi Iwashita, became principal, and under the lively guidance and advanced methods of this brilliant scholar the school reached a high standing and trained free-thinking citizens. Going about among the people, with a shabby old coat and a new camera, he was loved and revered by all for his witty wisdom, and the high moral training based on respect for persons. He died young, and was buried near his father in the cedar-shaded cemetery on the hillside above his home, while the school went on.

In 1950 the chuto grades were added to the sho, a kodo was built, and children from the town joined those from the farmlands. At this promising moment the school passed into the hands of the Society. Mother Sheldon's vision broadened like the view seen from Fuji-Noen, or from Sainte-Marie d'en Haut by Philippine before her. She wrote:

A third work in a somewhat middle-class milieu from a social point of view will not do us any harm, for in Japan we have a far too wide-spread reputation for being interested only in the well-to-do, rejecting the less favored by wealth or rank.

Susono was an ideal opening. Climate, solitude and beauty were strong attractions; still more attractive was a simple way of life, open to Gospel values. The little school with its genuine Japanese grassroots offered a fresh approach to evangelization.

The eight members of the community* arrived in Easter-tide, 1952. Mother Sheldon presented them to the excited children and teachers, and family spirit was formed at once in Seishin Onjoshu. On April 19 the first mass was offered by Father Corvasier, and from then on the Paris Foreign Missioners came

faithfully, on foot or by bicycle.

The first years were “the valley time”, hard and happy. Mother Duff, as superior, grew young again after her experiences in China, and joined the property walks up the long slopes where the future buildings would rise. Much was lacking, and Fuji Noen was affectionately called “Fuji-No-Yen”. But it grew quickly into its surroundings, helped by the kindly interest of Bishop Luke Arai of Yokohama. Mr. Sugiyama managed the farm; Oba San, whose baptism was the first major ceremony, smoothed the house-keeping; young Raphael Nakaya made himself “the indispensable”, and so remained. There were few Christians in the Sunday School and night classes for women, but friendship replaced prejudice. A farmhouse was made into a guesthouse called St. Joseph's for hospitality was to become Susono's specialty. Groups came and went: teachers, students, holiday-makers known and unknown. Among them came Sister Stuck, then over ninety, in honor of her Golden Jubilee.

Mother Yoshikawa, in Sankocho, was the official kocho, while Mother Yoshimura did the work on the spot. Everyone helped in the school. Mother Duff rehearsed an English play to be given for her own feast, then took her place as superior - to be surprised and delighted by the performance! The first graduation from the chuto was on March 23, 1954**. Then a Koto Gakko was added, leading to a full high-school diploma. It was promptly approved by Mombusho, and a new building, St. Michael's was constructed for its use.

As for the children, then numbering 136, they would have been a delight to Mother Duchesne. One little girl from town got up at five o'clock even on winter mornings. Bringing her breakfast with her books, she made her way alone under the stars across the bridge, in time for 6:30 mass with the community. Kazuko Terada was, later on, the first graduate of Fuji Seishin to enter the Society, and became a missionary to Kenya.

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