

## YASUKUNI-TO

### Swords made at the Yasukuni Shrine.

Originally founded by the newly restored Emperor Meiji in 1868, the shrine at Kudanshita in Tokyo, named Shokonsha, was for the worship of the spirits of those who gave their lives in the defence of the Empire of Japan. The term Yasukuni of Yasukuni Shrine was bestowed by the Emperor Meiji in 1879 and means “Peaceful Country”, implying that owing to the great sacrifices made, the Empire enjoys peace and tranquillity. Today, Yasukuni Shrine has many political overtones as it is seen as a war memorial glorifying Japan’s recent past aggression in the 1930’s and 40’s. There is a very interesting museum known as the Yushukan attached to the shrine which is well worth a visit as there is a comprehensive collection with objects reflecting the time since the Shrine’s founding, as well as a collection of antique swords and armour. In addition there are displays from the World War 2 period including, amongst other objects, a suicide plane and a one man submarine. Of particular note in the collection, is a rare Gensui-to or Field Marshal’s sword, that was the personal gift from the Emperor. At various times, archery, sumo and flower arranging displays are carried out in the grounds of the shrine, whilst in April, the grounds of the shrine are one of the most recommended places in Tokyo, for viewing the cherry-blossom.

As swords are made from natural elements, which according to the Japanese religion of Shintoism, all possess an individual spirit or *kami*, then it is not inappropriate that swords were often made in shrines such as Yasukuni. The earliest swords made in Yasukuni Shrine were made in 1886 on the occasion of the 56<sup>th</sup> dedication of a new Ise Shrine (the old one is torn down and replaced every 25 years). Miyamoto Kanenori and Heiki Kanetsugu were required to make some of the 66 straight swords required for this occasion and they did this at Yasukuni Shrine which was less than 20 years old itself then.

By 1933, Japan had descended into the *kuroi-tani* (black valley) of military fascism and the army had a firm control of the government. The military emphasised *Yamato-daimishi* or the Japanese spirit of the samurai and corrupted the principles of *Bushido* to its own ends. It was decreed that all officers of the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy should imitate the samurai and wear a sword. It was not intended that they necessarily be proficient at *kendo* (Japanese fencing) but that the sword would boost their sense and appreciation of *bushido* so that each officer could have his day as a samurai.

The Nihonto Tanren Kai Foundation (NTK) the Japanese Sword Forging Association, was a non-profit making organisation funded by the Army and private donations, and was founded by Army Minister Araki Sadao at Yasukuni Shrine in July 1933. At this time there were thought to be only ten active swordsmiths in the entire country and it was feared that the traditional forging skills and techniques of Japanese sword making, were in grave danger of being lost. The philosophy was that officers of higher rank should have good quality and traditionally made swords, demonstrating a pure Japanese spirit in the many countries in which they fought and occupied. These were to be of far higher quality than the more common Showa-to or mass-produced swords produced in their thousands and mostly made in the town of Seki in Gifu Prefecture.

About thirty people worked at Yasukuni Shrine at various times until the cessation of hostilities in 1945. Over these twelve years 8,100 swords, which became known as Yasukuni-to, were produced and they had three important characteristics:

- They restored production of the raw material for swords known as *tamahagane*. This had been discontinued in the last year of the Taisho period (1925). After the war the Yasukuni *tatara* (smelter) was reinstated by the NBTHK (Sword Society) and is still in operation today.
- Famous swordsmiths from various different schools collaborated and came together. This was not the case in the past when swordsmiths jealously guarded their own school's secrets.
- There was a well organised system including regular wages for the swordsmiths.

All swordsmiths working at Yasukuni were given the first character in the Shrine's name -*Yasu*- as the first character of their smith's name. At the beginning there were two swordsmiths, Miyaguchi Yasuhiro (1897-1956) who was a pupil of Kasama Ikkansai Shigetsugu and who made some 500 blades at Yasukuni, the second, Kajima Yasutoku (1881-1957) was a pupil of Yokoyama Sukeyoshi and from Hiroshima. They were joined six months later by Ikeda Yasumitsu who came from the school of Ikeda Kazuhide. Later two additional swordsmiths (Kotani Yasunori and Kajiyama Yasutoshi) were promoted from the *sakit * or hammer-men. The following was written in a sword magazine in 1933, describing the founding members, Yasuhiro and Yasutoku's background.

*“One of the selected smiths is called Miyaguchi Shigeru and comes from Sugamo in Tokyo. He is thirty-seven years old, the third generation swordsmith in his family. He learned swordmaking from his father when he was very young, and afterwards he apprenticed himself to Kasama Ikkansai Shigetsugu. He later became a trainee of the Chuo Token Kai. He was engaged in swordmaking and blade engraving after retiring from the institute. His sugata resembles that of fine old blades; the hamon are skilfully tempered, and he is highly accomplished at blade engraving. His real name is Toshihiro, but he was given the name “Yasuhiro” by the Minister of War.*

*The other smith is Kojima Tokutaro, from Nikata Town, Kamo County in Hiroshima Prefecture. He is fifty-two years old. He is a second generation swordsmith and learned Bizen-den from his father, then apprenticed himself to Yokoyama Sukeyoshi, who calls himself the 58<sup>th</sup> generation descended from Bizen Tomonari. Tokutaro forges very strong jigane, though his swords have a modest appearance. He used to be called “Ujimasa” but was given the name of “Yasunori (Yasutoku) by the Minister of War.”*

In line with the general philosophy of making swords in the traditional manner and using traditional raw materials, no machines, other than drills for making the *mekugi-ana* (tang holes) were used at Yasukuni. The typical Yasukuni-to were modelled after the style of Nagamitsu and Kagemitsu (both very early swordsmiths from Osafune in Bizen province). These swords were more slender and graceful than those generally made in the early Showa period (1926-45) and usually had a small *kissaki* or point. The normal length or *nagasa* of Yasukuni-to is between 63.6 cm and 66.7 cm. Generally the Yasukuni-to was signed in the manner of the *tachi*, which is on the

outer side of the tang when the sword is worn with the cutting edge down. The name was usually only two characters and set above the *mekugi-ana* and the date would be on the reverse side to the name. The limited number of *tanto* or daggers produced were signed in the conventional manner. The *yasurime* (file marks on the tang) on Yasukuni-to are usually *kiri* (horizontal) and the *nakago-jiri* (butt end of the tang) are *kuri-jiri* or rounded, although Yasumitsu used *kengata-jiri* (pointed).

Of the swords produced at Yasukuni Shrine by the NTK, approximately a third were subjected to *tameshigiri* (cutting tests). These were conducted after the initial polishing had been done and concerned about one third of the total swords produced. The cutting tests were done by the “*Suemono-giri*” method. This involved the straw from *tatami* mats being wrapped around a core of bamboo and then soaked overnight in water, which produced a target considered to have the texture of flesh and bone and so provided a realistic test. The sharpness was reported by the testers to the Nihonto Tanren Kai who made every effort to improve quality based on these results. There is also evidence that they had feedback from those officers in the field who owned Yasukuni-to, as they reduced the weight having heard that the earlier swords were too heavy a burden for soldiers on a long march.

Also twice a month, all the newly produced swords were examined by a very strict *shinsa* or examination and appraisal panel which was organised by the important sword association called the Chuo Token Kai who also selected new smiths to work at Yasukuni. It was emphasised that the judges should “give no consideration to politics, human relationships, or the reputation of the smiths” when selecting smiths. When blades were being inspected their details were recorded and they were ranked as “Ko”, “Otsu”, “Hei” or they were disqualified and their prices were set accordingly. The strict *shinsa* ensured that high standards were maintained as well as setting the price for individual swords which were sold by Kaiko-sha Association, which seems to have been a non-profit making retail arm of the Foundation.

Here it may be noted that some of the swordsmiths at Yasukuni Shrine, were unhappy with the restrictions placed on them by the strict *shinsa* panel, only wanting swords made to a very narrow design brief. This was especially so of Kajima Yasunori, who when making swords at the shrine would push the limits of the *shinsa* panel’s tolerance by adding *tobiyaki* (small isolated hard patches in the body of the sword appearing to have broken away from the *hamon*). He would also make some *hamon* or hardened edge, in *choji-midare* with many *ashi* which was more ornate than the *shinsa* panel required. Yasunori left Yasukuni in Showa 15<sup>th</sup> year (1940) but he remained active in his home town but here he signed swords “Akemi Masamune”. It is also known that even whilst still working at Yasukuni Shrine, Yasunori had his own separate workshop and blades not made at the Shrine were signed “Takenori”. All swordsmiths were eventually allowed to make a small amount of swords conforming to their own taste.

Most Yasukuni-to were quenched with a *suguha* (straight) *hamon*. It was this style that the Army preferred and it was quicker to make than other styles (as mentioned above) and in the prevailing situation, time was a very important factor. There were, however slight differences and sometimes other styles of *hamon* such as *gunome* (rounded) and *sanbon-tsugi* (3 cedars) are seen. Also the *sakité* or hammer men, sometimes made swords in the name of the masters and in the case of Yasumitsu,

signed the master's name, a practice known as *dai-saku*. In this situation, however, Yasuhiro and Yasutoku signed the student's work and this is known as *dai-mei*. A further variation was that Yasunori would sign in a different style from his usual manner when signing *dai-saku* blades and it is important for collectors to study these variations closely to ascertain the actual maker and background of individual pieces. None of the swordsmiths at Yasukuni Shrine used their Yasukuni names after leaving the shrine or if working elsewhere. Unfortunately, *gimei* or fake signatures of Yasukuni swordsmiths are encountered these days and so great care must be taken when examining examples.

It was customary that swords were sometimes given as gifts by the emperor to graduates who attained distinguished grades at the Imperial Army Staff College and the Imperial Naval College. Known as "*Onkashi-to*", *katana* were given to the Army whilst the Navy had *tanto* or daggers. These were swords of superior quality and the weight and dimensions, including the curvature, were very specific. After the inspection agreed that they were worthy of being *Onkashi-to* the smith was allowed to sign the sword and added the characters KINSAKU after his name, meaning "Respectfully made this". Unlike normal work, the name inscription seems to have been made below the *mekugi-ana* or tang hole, on these swords. Of course as an Army organisation, it was unusual that even *tanto* blades would be made for the Navy, but this was because the official smith of the Imperial Naval College, Horii Toshihide, had become very ill and was unable to forge blades. Of course, it was a great honour for a swordsmith to have his work recognised as *Onkashi-to*.

As well as the swordsmiths, a number of polishers were employed by the Nihonto Tanren Kai and both trained and worked at Yasukuni Shrine. A master polisher would have several apprentices who, for the first six months of their employment would practice foundation work only, on swords that had failed inspection by the *shinsa* panel and were due for destruction. After that they polished two or three swords a month but the *kissaki* (point) and finishing work was done by the teacher. The students were allowed to do finishing work two years after entering the Foundation and after a further two years they would be considered as official sword polishers for the Foundation. Towards the end of the Pacific War around 1944, many had been called up to serve in the armed forces but there were still eight sword polishers working full time and finishing some thirty swords each month.

After Japan's surrender in August, 1945 and the occupation of the country by the Allied troops under General McArthur, the general population seems to have reacted strongly against the instruments of war. As well as swords being surrendered in various theatres of war, they were confiscated by the Allies in the homeland and many were destroyed. The ordinary people seem to have considered swords to be an unwelcome reminder of the recent past and the devastation that the military had brought to the country. Even many of the sword collectors and experts seem to have taken a low profile and especially those swords made in the early Showa period, were associated with the military defeat. There seems to have been little or no differentiation between the mass-produced Showa-to and the traditionally made *gendaito* (modern but traditionally made swords from the 20<sup>th</sup> century) such as those produced at Yasukuni Shrine. If they had a Showa period date on their tangs, they were not wanted. Indeed, those mass produced Showa-to were declared illegal and it

was a criminal offence to be caught with one except under the most extreme and special circumstances (such as a single sword owned by a veteran or his family).

Of course, it is a matter of record that the wholesale destruction of swords was stopped thanks to the efforts of certain enlightened individuals both Japanese and in the Occupation forces. The destruction orders were rescinded and swords of artistic, cultural and historical importance became regulated and required registration and the Japanese Art-Sword Preservation Society (NBTHK) was founded. In Japan the mass-produced Showa-to remain illegal to this day.

I know of at least one instance where a well intentioned Western collector attempted to return a surrendered sword to the family of the original owner, but it was refused and even seen as a cause of great embarrassment. This was quite enlightening as it seemed that even amongst the sword community in Japan, the differentiation between Showa-to and *gendaito* such as the swords made at Yasukuni Shrine, was blurred and many Japanese buyers would not touch them. This may have been due to the Army's control and involvement in the Nihonto Tanren Kai and all things associated with the military were shunned. The younger post war generation of polishers and restorers seem to have mainly never encountered swords made at Yasukuni Shrine and if they did, would not consider them worthy of their efforts.

During the 1970's and 80's many Japanese dealers came to the West attempting to buy swords and return them to Japan. This helped create a renewed interest in Japanese art that had understandably waned in the immediate post war period. As the price of antique Japanese swords escalated out of the reach of many Western collectors, the Yasukuni-to seemed very cheap for swords of such outstanding quality and were eagerly collected by Western collectors. Even as late as the 1980's a top Japanese polisher resident in the UK, admitted to never having seen a Yasukuni-to and when asked to polish one was reluctant. However, when he actually saw the piece he was very surprised at how good the sword was and happily polished it, realising that such swords were genuine art swords that deserved a place in Japanese sword history and were not merely low quality Army-issue weapons.

It should also be stated that Fujishiro Okisato, one of Japan's foremost polishers today, was one of the first to reach this conclusion in Japan. He was born close to Yasukuni Shrine and has his workshop in the Kudan area of Tokyo also in close proximity to Yasukuni Shrine, so this is quite understandable. However, it seems that it is mainly the Western collector that brought Yasukuni-to to the notice of the modern sword society in Japan. Now, largely due to the efforts of Fujishiro Okisato, there have been exhibitions of Yasukuni-to at the Shrine in 1994 and the NBTHK's Sword Museum in 1995 creating greater awareness and acceptance of these swords amongst the Japanese population.

In 1983, thirty-one of the surviving swordsmiths, polishers and officials involved in the Yasukuni Shrine sword making, dedicated an 0-dachi (long tachi) to the Yasukuni Shrine, commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Nihonto Tanren Kai. It was presented by Yakuwa Yasutake on the 8<sup>th</sup> July to the head priest Matsudaira Yoshinaga and is now displayed in the Yushukan.

