How my polio opened the door to a new world

– Invention, health, linguistic equality and justice –

Preface

I was born in a small town in the northeast corner of the Japanese island of Shikoku, a town famous for its glove industry, and I inherited my father's glove business. In the last half century, fierce competition has brought the number of glove manufacturers down from more than two hundred to a quarter of that number. It was inevitable that a labour-intensive industry such as ours would be hit by rising labour costs, but we were saddled with a further weakness – the fact that we made a seasonal product that sells only in winter.

After succeeding to the family business, I worked hard to sell our little firm's products to the world, but breaking away from our reliance on a seasonal product was a challenge. The only way to meet this challenge was to come up with a striking new product.

After much hard effort, we developed the body-supporting Swany Bag and the world's smallest folding wheelchair, the Swany Mini.

The impetus behind this product development came from my own disability, caused by having polio just after I was born. In this book, I should like to share some of the drama involved along the way.

Later, I suffered a kidney disease, from which I recovered after undergoing difficult fasting therapy. I shall also be writing about my experience with this health regime.

Next, I shall discuss my involvement with the question of an international language.

Since I was young, I have been an active supporter of the campaign for Esperanto. I shall explain the reasons why I feel the question of international communication is so important, and consider what will happen to the world if the English language is allowed to continue its global takeover.

This is a story of rebirth, achieved with my disability as a springboard.

In later years, I came to see my misfortune as having been behind my happiness, but meanwhile, having reached the age of 81, I find attachment to my remaining life raising its head. When talking about their own life, people have a tendency to boast. Even when they are being self-effacing, talking about their failures or negative sides, people tend to boast in a 'modest' way. The story I tell in this book is probably no exception. Even so, I hope that there is something in my life experience that might be of use in some way to others who are living with disabilities like mine, or who are facing difficulties at work or at home in the Covid-19 pandemic. I shall take the plunge and try my best to recount my experiences honestly and straightforwardly.

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1 Karma

My background

My family home is on the coast of the Seto Inland Sea in Japan. If you open the back gate, you can see the sea and the island of Shōdoshima right in front of you.

When I was at elementary school, my summers were spent playing in pools dug at the water's edge and swimming in the shallow water. Every day my brothers and I would come home from the beach and walk into the house with the sand still stuck to our bodies, to receive a telling-off from my mother. Tsuneo Naruse, who lived next door and was at junior high school, was always with us. He used to pull me by the leg into the deeper water and watch me alternately floating and sinking. But when it looked dangerous, he would push me back to the shallows. I would swim like crazy, gulping sea water, but because I knew he was there if I got into trouble, I enjoyed the thrill of flirting with danger.

Soon I found that I could swim for about four or five metres. I swam every day, and I made such progress that by the time I went up to junior high school I was swimming hundreds of metres out to sea. The clear blue sky, the jellyfish touching me as I swam close to the shore, the small fishes darting away from me, and seeing the underwater panorama where the starfish lived when I dived down, I found myself drawn in, mind and body, to this world.

In the water, my right leg, which caused me problems on dry land, gave me no difficulty at all. I would swim for hundreds of metres across the smooth water north towards Shōdoshima, and then relax my body and rest, lying on my back. The water nearly came up to my nose and mouth, but I hardly drank any. For the four or five minutes I lay there, floating on the surface in a state of blissful weightlessness, it was like paradise on earth.

I was born on 16 December 1939, just to the west of Kyōrenji Temple in Shirotori in Kagawa Prefecture on the island of Shikoku (In 2003, Shirotori merged with the neighbouring towns of Ōchi and Hiketa to form the new city of Higashikagawa). When I was only six months old, I developed a high fever, and after my mother took me round all the local hospitals, I was given a diagnosis of 'infantile paralysis', and my right leg remained affected.

When I was at elementary school, we used to go into the grounds of Shirotori Shrine, a Shinto shrine next to the school, to do physical exercises. It was a wide sandy area next to the sea, with lots of tall pine trees. Because I couldn't do the exercises well, the teachers made me stand apart and look after the other boys' clothes. I really hated those exercise sessions.

But even though the others beat me at everything else, there was one thing that I was better at than they were: handstands. And the strength in my arms from doing handstands and walking on my hands was to be very useful to me in later life.

Three months before I was born, on 1 September, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, starting World War II. Two years later, on 8 December 1941, the Pacific War broke out with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, plunging the world into turmoil. But my childhood memories are of distress about my leg, and of the wide open sea, the sand, and the blue sky.

Narrow escape in a rickety boat

About 500 metres west of my house there was a beach with a place where you could hire a rowing boat for twenty-five yen an hour. When I was still at elementary school, a friend told me that they were getting rid of old boats, and I begged my father to buy one. 'No', he said in a final way, 'boats are dangerous'.

I pressed him, 'I can't win at anything on land, but in the sea I can!'

My father thought for a while, and then said, 'how much do they want for it?'

My father, who spent his whole life working, couldn't imagine what it was like owning a boat. 'You'll have trouble when there's a typhoon. You'd better not come to me about it.' The boat would be my responsibility. 'Hooray!' I shouted.

In the afternoons and during the holidays I invited my classmates over and enjoyed myself taking them out rowing. Four of us would occupy the seat for two rowers, while one sat in the back giving directions. When the island of Hitogojima came into view, we would all yell together, 'Look, there's Hitogojima!' and we would row out to this little island about three kilometres off the coast, pulling on our oars like mad, and row round the island before heading back.

But if going was easy, coming back was harder, and we had to make a tremendous effort before we finally reached the shore, rowing a ridiculous distance for children like us.

There is a south wind that blows down from the Sanuki Mountains, which form the border between Kagawa and Tokushima Prefectures, down and across the sea to Shōdoshima. One day, my classmates went out rowing with me when this south wind was blowing. With this tailwind behind us, we reached the little island of Hitogojima in practically no time. When we got there, 'white horses' were forming on the waves around the island, and we realised that there wasn't a moment to spare – we had to set off back immediately. With the boat buffeted east and west, we struggled to keep the bow pointed south, rowing for our lives. Dozens of times we were hit by powerful gusts, but we managed to keep going. We were terrified that if the boat were to capsize we would be carried out on the waves towards Shōdoshima.

Luckily, the boat held together, and, rowing desperately, we made it back. There, on the shore, we saw my grandfather Senzō waving a big bamboo stick and yelling:

'If you try to come ashore, I'll kill you!'

The sight of my furious grandfather frightened us, but he was desperately worried about us, and this was his way of teaching us never to go out again in a southerly wind. He became instantly famous at school as 'Etsuo's scary grandpa', and my friends stopped coming to play with me for a while after that.

When I went up to senior high school, a two-metre-high sea wall was built along the shore, and now there was nowhere to keep my boat. Boating had taught me the harshness of nature and the dangers of the sea, as well as strengthening my arms. But my rowing days were now over.

My father

My father Tomio was born on 3 October 1908, in Sanbonmatsu in the town of Ōchi, the third son of Genzō and Sumi Kyōwa, who had a total of five sons and four daughters. The Kyōwa family ran a general store, selling hardware and household goods. Soon after my father was born, his mother stopped producing milk, and so he was taken to be looked after by the Miyoshi family in neighbouring Shirotori. His foster mother Yone was devoted to him, and he grew up without ever feeling that he was being treated differently on account of being a foster child.

After about a year, my father's real mother Sumi gave birth to another boy, and since she was now busy with the new child, Tomio was left with his new family in Shirotori. When he was four years old, his mother Sumi died, and since Yone had no children of her own, he was formally adopted into the Miyoshi family.

Yasuji Miyoshi, Tomio's adoptive father, loved drinking *sake* and was forever changing jobs, and the family lived in poverty. They couldn't afford rice, and every day they ate boiled wheat instead. While working as a salesman for the drug company Teikoku Seiyaku, Yasuji found himself unable to keep up with his payments to the company, and the family's possessions were seized by bailiffs. Then came two daughters, Akiko and Takako, and a son,

Ryōtarō. Now numbering six, the family really struggled. Later, the family was dealt a massive blow with the loss of Ryōtarō, now the breadwinner, in the Second Sino-Japanese War at the age of 23.

There is a story about my father not joining his class's school trip, which consisted of taking the steamboat a little way down the coast to Takamatsu, the nearest big town, because he couldn't bear to ask his adoptive mother for the money, and killing the time by tagging along with the lower year's picnic instead.

On condition that they would let him attend the last two years of elementary school, which were not compulsory then, my father went to work as an apprentice at the Takeuchi soy sauce brewery. The apprentice system was very strict in those days, and my father was treated like a servant even by his master's little children.

In a further effort to escape poverty, he bought a hen and sold the eggs to earn a little money.

Overcoming hardship and meeting my mother

When he was twenty years old, the news reached the village that Tomio's adoptive father Yasuji, who had not been heard from since leaving for Hokkaido eight years previously, had died. Tomio travelled north alone, as there wasn't enough money for Yone to go with him.

The body had been given a temporary burial at a lonely snow-covered cemetery outside Hakodate. Arriving in the evening, Tomio dug up and opened the coffin to confirm the body's identity. He was surprised to see blood flowing from Yasuji's nose, even though he had been dead for ten days.

The body was cremated straight away, but by the time the ashes were returned to him, it was ten o'clock at night. It was snowing heavily, and as he had little money, he spent the night shivering in a freezing hut next to the crematorium, clutching Yasuji's ashes.

The next day, my father took the Aomori-Hakodate ferry and then the train to Tokyo Ueno Station. It was his first time in the capital, but with no money to spare he just trudged on foot to Tokyo Main Station holding Yasuji's ashes. Two days and two nights later, he finally arrived back home.

Aged 15, having finished eight years of elementary school, my father went to work for the Kanzaki glove company, a business with just eight staff in the Fukushima district of Osaka. Working from eight o'clock in the morning till ten at night, he earned a monthly salary of five yen plus meals. As the new recruit, he also had the job of cleaning the workshop. This was not a bad wage for a youth in those days (you could buy one and a half kilos of rice for ten *sen*, or one-tenth of a yen), but by the time he went to the bathhouse at the end of the day it was past midnight.

After working there for three years he became a skilled glove-maker, and he went back to Shirotori, where he started work at the Yamamoto glove factory, an enterprise employing a few dozen people, and it was there that he met his life partner, my mother Shimeko.

When he was seventeen, my father had attended a lecture by Onisaburo Deguchi (1871-1948), co-founder of the Oomoto religion, and he was so impressed with Onisaburo's teachings that he became an Oomoto member on the spot.

In 1935, when he was 27, my father, who was the leader of the Shirotori Branch of Oomoto, was suddenly taken away to the local police station and detained. State suppression of the Oomoto religion had begun for the second time. It was alleged that Onisaburo was a traitor who was attempting to usurp the imperial throne. Tomio tried to protest, summoning all the arguments he could muster, but when he was threatened with a lengthy prison sentence he decided that for the sake of his family the safest thing to do was to bear the injustice and make an outward show of renouncing his faith. Thus, he was able to escape persecution and return home.

My mother

My mother Shimeko (1911-1998) was born on 28 August 1911 in the village of Matsubara, the second daughter of Senzō and Nobu Tani. Her elder sister had died before she was born, so she was the only child. Although they were not well off, Senzō and Nobu were devoted to their daughter and, unusually for a farming family at that time, allowed her to stay on for the last two years of elementary school after finishing her six years' compulsory education, and they also gave her lessons in traditional dance and music. After first meeting each other at the Yamamoto glove factory, my mother and father grew fond of each other, but Senzō, my grandfather, hated the fact that Tomio was an Oomoto believer. He found the idea horrifying that Tomio was a fanatical follower of this 'sinister cult', as Oomoto was portrayed, although in later years he came to be proud of his son-in-law.

Another obstacle was the question of the continuation of the Tani family line. Tomio, although adopted, was the heir of the Miyoshi family and, since the death of Ryōtarō, the only son. Shimeko had no brothers, so if she married into Tomio's family it would mean the extinction of the Tani family. Pressured by her parents, who were loath to let the family die out (as well as being suspicious of Oomoto), Shimeko reluctantly gave up her hopes of marrying Tomio and married a man from the same town, who took her name and became heir to the Tani family – a common arrangement in Japan when there are no sons in a family.

In 1931, the year of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, when Shimeko was twenty and had given birth to her first son, Hajime, the marriage broke down. After the divorce, Shimeko's first husband went to fight in the war in China and died in battle. After I grew up, my mother told me that the father of my eldest brother was 'resting in the highest place in the military cemetery'.

As soon as he heard about the divorce, Tomio, my father, proposed to Shimeko. Moved that his feelings for her had not changed, she accepted.

Marriage and disapproval

When my parents began their married life, my father was 24 and my mother was 21. My father left the Miyoshi house with all his belongings in a suitcase and moved in with my mother in an annexe of Senzō's house. Although my grandfather accepted their marriage and my father's moving in, he still disapproved of Oomoto. When my father was taken into custody by the police, Senzō urged him to quit the religion. Even out here in the provinces, everyone was talking about the news of the 'Oomoto incident', and the impression people had of Oomoto as a uniquely menacing cult was deeply entrenched. When he went outside, people would point and say, 'he's one of them'. My grandfather's awareness of Oomoto was no different from theirs.

Added to that, this was a time when most marriages were arranged; love marriages were a rarity, and the couple found themselves the subject of a lot of unwelcome gossip.

Because of his fear of being associated with Oomoto, my grandfather wouldn't allow the marriage to be registered, and so, until the Peace Preservation Law was repealed and the new civil code was enacted after the war, their status was that of common-law couple.

In the end, the Tani family name did not die out, but was continued by my half-brother, Hajime.

After the suppression of Oomoto began, my father was so distressed at the state's persecution of his fellow believers and the destruction of Oomoto's holy places that he lost his appetite and at one time his weight went down to 39 kilos. His brothers and sisters in Sanbonmatsu, worried that he might not survive, gave him 80 yen in lieu of a funeral offering,

thinking that the money would be more useful to him in life than after his death. My father used the money to go and recuperate at a hot spring in Kyushu, but he showed no sign of recovering, and so he decided to visit a psychic from Kyoto by the name of Nakao, who was staying in Takamatsu at the time. The psychic told him that the cause of the trouble was anxiety about his religious faith, and instructed him to enshrine the deity of the local Shinto shrine and pray to it, treating it as the God of Oomoto. Also, since neither the Miyoshi family nor the Tani family had been entirely happy about the marriage, they should have a fresh wedding ceremony, and after this things would improve. Once he had established himself, whatever he went on to do would be a success.

As instructed, my father obtained an object of worship from the Shirotori Shinto shrine and began praying to it. He also went back to the Miyoshi family home and went out again, wearing his formal kimono, to have a proper wedding. Just as the psychic had said, my father's health steadily improved, and within four months he was his old healthy self.

Assorted siblings

In 1935, the year of the suppression of Oomoto, my sister Kichiko was born, followed by a second son, Yoriaki, in 1937. Then, on 16 December 1939, I was born as the third son. Next came a fourth son, Asao, in 1942, and finally a fifth son, Haruo, in 1946.

My eldest (half-) brother, Hajime Tani, graduated early from Ōkawa Middle School (now Sanbonmatsu Senior High School) and entered Sixth Higher School in Okayama, which changed its name after the war to Okayama University. After graduating, Hajime entered the National Tax Administration Agency, serving as Head of the Kumamoto Regional Tax Administration Bureau, and later joined the consumer credit company Orient Corporation (Orico), rising to the position of Vice President. He is a recipient of the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Third Class, and lives in Kawasaki.

Kichiko and Yoriaki were always reading books, and seemed to live in a different world from their younger brothers. I remember there being a big seven-volume edition of the French novel *The Thibaults* on Kichiko's bookshelf. Sadly, she died at the age of 36, and her two children Chinami and Makoto were brought up by my parents. Yoriaki, the other bookworm, went to Waseda University in Tokyo and, after graduating, he joined Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), working in the News Bureau as Director, Producer, Division Director and Director of Personnel. Countless times he reviewed important documents and items for publication in the media for Swany (the glove company my father founded was renamed Swany in 1972). He now lives in Machida, near Tokyo.

According to his memory, when we were children I was the boss and my two younger brothers were my minions!

The fourth son, Asao, also went to Waseda University, and joined Swany after graduating. He worked hard for the company, taking charge of Swany Ikeda, Swany Kōchi, Swany Tokyo Branch and Swany Korea. He also played a major role in sorting out the chaotic situation at Swany China. He retired at the age of 50 to take up farming, his long-cherished ambition, and is now enjoying a life of self-sufficiency in Susaki, Kōchi Prefecture.

Haruo, my youngest brother, joined Swany after graduating from Asia University in Tokyo and, following his success in the branding of outdoor gloves, he became independent, taking the trademark rights in lieu of retirement pay. His 'Grip Swany' products continue to enjoy popularity with outdoor enthusiasts. Sadly, he died at the early age of 42 from bone marrow cancer, but his business continues, kept going by a new generation.

It was when I left for Tokyo at the age of twenty and my brothers came to see me that I heard one of them mention that my eldest brother, Hajime, had a different father, and first learned the truth about my own family.

2 Overcoming disability

Old US military tents – Swany's base

In 1937, my father, then 29 years old, put a sign up outside the annexe of Senzō's house advertising 'Miyoshi Sewing Machines' and went into business, at first selling sewing machines, and from the following year also making knitted gloves, having converted the upstairs floor into living accommodation for the staff. During the war, my father and five associates established the firm Toa Leather, and my father took office as a director. About 150 staff were employed making headgear for aircraft crews and other military supplies.

After the war, my father saw a new business opportunity. Hearing that the U.S. military was selling off surplus tents, and thinking that the hard-wearing tent material could be made into anything, he went to Osaka to bargain for the tents and brought them back, after successfully begging the ship owner to take them on board. But the sewing people told him that the material was too tough to sew and they couldn't do anything with it. After much experimentation, he was able to remove the waterproof coating by rubbing rice bran into it with a scrubbing brush.

My father obtained the purchasing rights for 900 tons of old tents from the government, and took out a bank loan of ¥10,000,000 (about three to four hundred million in today's money). These tents were made into trousers for coal miners, and they sold like hot cakes. The demand was huge because at this time, just after Japan's defeat in the war, there was an extreme shortage of everything.

He hired about a dozen people to scrub the tents with rice bran in the garden. I don't know what they did with the waste water. They probably let it drain out on to the road. Later, they took the work to a shallow part of the sea nearby. Once, my father returned from a business trip to find that three of the sewing girls were missing, Hisae Okada, Tomoko Hashimoto and Masae Ōnishi. He looked all round for them, and eventually found them swimming in the sea without a care in the world. 'Hurry up and get back to work!' he yelled out to them, but they called back, 'we can't come out of the water - we've got nothing on!' It's hard to imagine such a scene nowadays, but in some ways it was a more laid-back time than today.

When I was at elementary school, the heavy-duty miner's trousers were flying off the shelves at ¥100 a pair (about ¥4,000 in today's money), and our chests of drawers were stuffed full of hundred-yen notes. When new notes were issued after the war, bank withdrawals were limited to ¥300 per month per household, and we were keeping money in cash to avoid not being able to pay for materials and other expenses.

Once, when my father was on a crowded train, his briefcase, stuffed full of new banknotes, disappeared while he was in the toilet. It must have been a surprise for the thief to see what was inside. My father also donated money to Oomoto to help pay for the rebuilding of its centres, which had all been destroyed during the state suppressions. It was the earnings from this tent material that laid the foundation for the future Swany Corporation.

The words of the psychic had come true – it seemed that now Tomio had established himself, everything he did was a success.

In 1950, under the new name 'Miyoshi Textile Industries KK' and with an increased capital of ¥1,000,000, my father returned to his main business of glove-making. He travelled to Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka to build up his company's customer base, worked in the factory together with my mother to set an example to the employees, and cemented his position in the local glove-making industry.

Later, in 1969, my father became Chairman of the Japan Gloves Industrial Association, an organisation with 223 affiliated companies, and in 1972, he took office as President of the

Shirotori Chamber of Commerce. Later, he was to receive the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Fourth Class.

My debt to my father

My father taught me a lot.

Once, when I was at junior high school, he pulled out the nails from an old wooden crate and told me to straighten them. I took a handful of bent nails and, instead of straightening them, I threw them into the ditch and went out to play. When I came back, my father asked me about the nails. 'I straightened them all and put them in the box,' I fibbed, but then he held out a handful of unstraightened nails and demanded sternly, 'What are these, then?' My father was very strict about not wasting anything.

My job was to fill the crates with boxed gloves, nail the crates shut and bind them with rope. Although I was small, I had confidence in my strength and dexterity, and even today I can tie a rope swiftly and tightly.

When I came home from school one day my father told me to help pack the gloves in boxes.

I took the lid off a cardboard box, put the gloves inside, and replaced the lid. 'Not like that, you fool,' he scolded me. 'Put the first lid to one side, and use the lid from the next box.' I realised that doing it this way doubled efficiency. Whether it was cutting, or finishing, or whatever, he drilled into us the importance of efficiency.

Occasionally, I went with my father to visit clients. He would take me to places like Osaka, Nagoya, and even Tokyo. He had a habit of saying, 'Sales go up in proportion to time spent bargaining'. Sometimes meetings with clients went on so long that we skipped lunch, which as a young boy I found tough.

We would take the Katō Line night ferry to Osaka, and by six o'clock we would be having our breakfast at a stall at the ferry terminal in Tenpōzan, after which we went to visit leather merchants in Daikokuchō. At seven o'clock we knocked on the door of the Miyamae Store, and the boss, who was still having breakfast, welcomed us in and we started our meeting. Then, at eight o'clock, we would go next door to Nakamura Leather, where we stocked up on leather, after which we went round visiting customers in the Senba district. At the end of the day we would take the night ferry home.

My father travelled by night to places like Kōriyama, Niigata and Kanazawa, sometimes going for a whole week without staying at a hotel, as if he were trying to get into the *Guinness Book of Records*. For him, being on the road for two nights was nothing special.

My mother's blessing

There was something not quite right about the baby.

On closer inspection, its right leg was slack and it couldn't stand. A high fever raged for days with no sign of going down. The mother, panicking, ran around to all the local doctors.

'Infantile paralysis' was the diagnosis. And there would be after-effects.

That baby was me at the age of six months.

As an infant, I was always clinging to my mother, and after my polio I clung to her even more. My mother went to hospitals all over Shikoku and even in Osaka, with me strapped to her back. Sometimes they offered me electrotherapy, sometimes they gave me massage.

Desperate for her boy's leg to heal, my mother turned to her Oomoto faith. Until then, she had just gone along with it out of a sense of duty to my father, but with my polio as a turning point, she now devoted herself to her religion.

If I have any good qualities at all, it is entirely thanks to my mother.

She had an inner fortitude and an openness to others, and would make friends with anyone.

Considerate to a fault, she was the same with all my friends. And she was generous. If a visiting friend or relative expressed a liking for an object on a shelf, she would urge them to take it home with them without hesitation.

Once, she gave all the money she had to a poor person in Takamatsu and had to persuade the station staff to let her take the train back to Shirotori without a ticket. Because of her generosity, my father wouldn't let her carry his wallet, and she never asked him to.

On her monthly visits to the Oomoto centre in Kyoto, she took the slow train from Uno to save money, saying that it gave her more time to read the scriptures on the train, and she donated the money she had saved towards funding for Oomoto's activities.

My basic philosophy of life – put all your strength into achieving your goal, fix your eyes on reality, set yourself a target, ask yourself whether you are succeeding in doing these things – comes originally from my mother's influence.

My mother, who worked hard until late at night to help my father, and still found time to practise things like flower arranging and the tea ceremony to give richness and pleasure to life, was a model to me of how to live.

If you tried to deceive her, or if you betrayed her trust, she was unforgiving. She would wait patiently for you to reflect on your actions.

Whenever I have come up against a wall, it has been my mother's upright way of life that has encouraged me.

She always spoke her mind, and she could be piercing with her candid remarks, which may have offended people at times, but her openness earned her the trust of those around her.

My father never made any comment about my mother's behaviour, but watched her with a smile on his face.

My parents were frugal in their day-to-day life, and never used air-conditioning in summer or central heating in winter.

Content with simplicity, they gave to good causes without any fanfare.

Oomoto

At this point I should give a simple introduction to the teachings of Oomoto.

Hidemaru Deguchi (1897-1991), the husband of the third spiritual leader, summed up Oomoto's world view as follows:

'All things in Heaven and Earth are connected and integrated. And they are all constantly in motion. However much they move, however much they change, they are still interconnected, harmonised and integrated. This intricate and delicate unity is not something that can come about by chance. There has to be a great unifying will at work, and it is this great will that we call God.

'We can't see God, but we can feel God. Consider the invisible world, the invisible power. Be awake to that which creates us and gives us life.'

In 1892, Nao Deguchi (1837-1918), a woman living in Ayabe in Kyoto Prefecture suddenly entered a trance-like state, and began to utter a series of revelations. She protested to the spirit possessing her, and the spirit ordered her to write instead. 'I'm illiterate', she protested, but the spirit replied, 'you will not be writing, I will.' Nao went on to produce 200,000 pages of writings. These writings, known as the *Ofudesaki*, became the scriptures of Oomoto, and Nao became the religion's founder.

Seven years later, Kisaburō Ueda, a young man from Kameoka, also in Kyoto Prefecture, married Nao's youngest daughter Sumiko, and later changed his name to Onisaburo Deguchi. From then on, Nao and Onisaburo worked together to spread the spirit's teachings, and laid the foundations of Oomoto.

The *Ofudesaki* contains the teachings of Oomoto on subjects ranging from cosmology to society, history, politics, economics and life itself. Onisaburo took these writings and organised them into Oomoto's scripture so that they would be easier to understand. Onisaburo had pursued spiritual studies after undergoing his own religious experience, and this helped Oomoto's theology to take shape. Ayabe became Oomoto's ritual centre, while Kameoka became the headquarters for teaching and missionary activities.

Oomoto acquired the site of Kameyama Castle in Kameoka in 1919. This castle had a long history, having been built by Akechi Mitsuhide, who attempted to become ruler of Japan in the 16th century. The religion grew rapidly in the interwar years, attracting people from the military as well as intellectuals with its doctrine of 'reconstruction', and had considerable influence as a movement for the transformation of society.

The state grew fearful of Oomoto, viewing it as a threat to the Emperor's authority and to its own religious ideology, and as challenging the warlike mood of the time with its pacifist message. In 1921 and again in 1935, the state comprehensively suppressed Oomoto, invoking the law against lèse-majesté and the repressive Peace Preservation Law. The sanctuaries on both sites were destroyed using dynamite, and the leading members were imprisoned. Thousands of believers were rounded up, and sixteen lost their lives.

With Japan's defeat in the war, the leaders were acquitted of the charges of lèse-majesté and violation of the Peace Preservation Law, and Oomoto's innocence was established. The lawyers urged Onisaburo to seek compensation from the government in the courts, but Onisaburo renounced the right to claim compensation, saying that any such payment would come at the expense of a defeated people who had already suffered enough. This also meant that many of the facts of the affair never came to light.

Under the slogan 'one God, one world, one international language', Oomoto has been active in promoting interfaith dialogue, forming partnerships with Taoists, Christians, Muslims and others; the world federation movement, which aims at the establishment of a world government; and the popularisation of the international auxiliary language Esperanto as an easy and neutral medium of international cooperation.

Oomoto's aim could be summed up as the salvation of humanity through a reconstruction of the world.

My parents join Oomoto

My father visited the Oomoto headquarters when he was seventeen, and heard the 54-year-old co-founder Onisaburo speak for the first time. Onisaburo already had quite a reputation as a prolific poet who produced verses by the hundred, as a possessor of psychic powers, and as a dynamic activist, and was called variously a 'great prophet', a 'monster', and an 'adventurer'. However, Onisaburo had not a trace of pomposity, and my father was attracted to his common-man appeal. According to my father, when he heard Onisaburo talk about the spiritual world and the reality of eternal life he felt the presence of a great light illuminating his future and he felt filled with a spiritual power such as he had never experienced before.

My father, who had undergone hardship and humiliation, found himself shaken to his soul by Onisaburo's teaching of the transformation of a world ruled by the power of money. He became a member on the spot, and resolved to live modestly without pursuing wealth and status, and to spread Oomoto's teachings.

In 1935, my father became leader of the Shirotori Branch of Oomoto, and in 1958 he took office as head of the Shirotori Regional Office. From 1964, he served as head of the Kagawa Prefectural Headquarters for 12 years, and as a member of the Oomoto Council of Deputies for 26 years.

My mother, following Oomoto's teaching that 'art is the mother of religion', practised

Japanese poetry, calligraphy, painting, tea ceremony and flower arranging, and played the two-stringed zither, the yakumogoto. She applied herself to all these things, seemingly never feeling tired from work. She also kept a diary nearly all her life.

In 1952, she became leader of the Oomoto Shirotori Women's Association, in 1961 she became Chair of the Oomoto Kagawa Federation, and in 1965 Chair of the Oomoto Shikoku Women's Liaison Council. Outside Oomoto, she became Director of the Shirotori Centre for Working Women in 1971. In 1982, she became the first Chair of the newly reorganised Oomoto Women's Association, in which capacity she travelled all over the country delivering lectures. From 1983 to 1988 she served as a councillor on the General Council of Oomoto, and from 1986 she was Chair of the Oomoto Friends of Esperanto.

Struggle with disability

Despite my mother's desperate efforts, my polio left me with a disability in my leg.

Fortunately, I could walk unassisted, but my right leg was poorly developed and weak. A struggle with this disease had begun, a struggle that would last my whole life. And yet I believe that if I had not had this disease, neither the person that I became nor my company would exist.

Until I was in the lower years of elementary school, my mother Shimeko took me regularly to Osaka University Hospital. In the 1930s, the transport links were not as good as they are now. First, we had to take the Uno-Takamatsu ferry across to the mainland, and when we arrived at Uno, the passengers ran for the Okayama train, pushing and jostling each other, leaving us to follow on behind. At Okayama, we changed onto the San'yō Line for the four-hour journey to Osaka, which I spent kneeling on newspaper spread on the floor.

At the hospital, I was made to walk along a crowded corridor wearing only my shorts, with the other patients all staring at me. I wanted to hide my withered right leg, not show it to everyone! I was silently crying out for my mother to come and rescue me.

When I started elementary school, I had to walk about 250 metres from my house to the school, and I couldn't keep up with my classmates. Sometimes I let my mother give me a piggyback, even though I could walk if I made the effort. But in my heart I was just wishing that I could walk and jump and play with my own legs.

It was a shock when some of my classmates pointed and laughed at me. I went to bed crying and couldn't sleep for hours. I was so ashamed of my bad leg that I gradually stopped walking, with the result that while I was growing, my leg and hip development was impeded.

Thanks to this, while my siblings were all more than 170 centimetres tall, I was only 160 centimetres.

But I took my revenge on my classmates by soaking their textbooks in water whenever they teased me.

Kenzō Abe, my class teacher in the fifth and sixth years of elementary school, admonished my classmates, saying they should help me, and he himself used to carry my bag for me when we went on excursions. Mr Abe always stood up for me, and he was my one and only support.

Enduring all this during my childhood seems to have led me to develop an inner strength that enabled me to bear adversity in later life. Although encountering repeated setbacks, I never felt that I was suffering. Except for once, when my heart was broken...

Rejection and disappearance

In my youth, I experienced the greatest trial of my life. At 22 years old, rejected by the girl I had been in love with since I was in high school, I fell into the depths of despair.

Convinced that the reason was my disability, I lost the will to live.

Early one morning in March, I got on my scooter, intending to drown myself in the sea,

and rode off. At Naruto, I took the ferry to Awaji Island. I rode to the north of the island and then took the ferry across to Akashi on the mainland. Without realising it, my hands were steering me towards my elder brother Yoriaki's house in Tokyo. 'Yes, I'll go and tell my brother about wanting to escape from this world,' I thought, and rode on.

In those days, National Route 1, the main arterial road, was just wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other, and there was little room for two-wheelers. As I rode along at about 20 kph, hundreds, no thousands, of heavy trucks roared as they overtook me only inches away. I rode on, past Kyoto, past Lake Hamana and across the River Tenryū. Freezing cold, I pressed ahead, as though possessed. I took frequent rests at the side of the road, but the night cold was killing me. I would stop my scooter and shake myself, stamp my feet and rub my hands in an attempt to get warm. As I approached Hakone Pass, the uphill slope seemed to climb forever, and my spirits flagged.

I stopped at a noodle stall. The truck driver next to me looked at me and said, 'You don't look too well. How far are you going?' 'Tokyo,' I replied. 'It's too dangerous. I'll take you,' he said, and took my scooter and threw it onto the back of a truck with 'Seino Transportation' written on the side. I climbed into the warm passenger seat and soon dozed off.

Afterwards, my eldest brother Hajime went to the head office of Seino Transportation to try to find and thank the man who he was sure had saved my life. But no one came forward, presumably because the drivers were forbidden to pick up passengers.

Anyway, thanks to the truck driver I made it as far as Tokyo, but I didn't know my brother's address, and I just rode around with no idea where to look for him. For the first time I realised how huge Tokyo was. Then I remembered that he lived somewhere near Tokyo Metropolitan University in Meguro, and as I was looking around the neighbourhood of the university I bumped into Kazuko, my brother's wife, who had gone out looking for me. 'Etchan!' she called me by my nickname, 'what are you doing here, out in the cold?' She took me to their house and presently my brother, who had also been out looking for me, came home. 'Fancy coming all the way here from Shikoku!' he said, looking appalled.

My anguish at being rejected by the girl I had been in love with for five years suddenly exploded.

I cried and wailed for about an hour. It was the first time I had ever let anyone see me shed tears. Back home, in turmoil over my disappearance, the news came by telephone that I was in Tokyo, and my father came straight up. He tried his best to console me, taking me back to Osaka by aeroplane (I'd never been on a plane before) and then taking me to the hot spring resort of Sakakibara in Ise, where he had arranged that we would meet up with my mother. We stayed the night there, and I told them, in tears, that I wanted to go to the spirit world where I wouldn't have this wretched body.

Even now I remember my parents' concern and my mother's haggard face.

Thinking about it makes me realise how fortunate I am to have had my family's loving support, and now to have my own precious family, with my wife, my three daughters and four grandchildren.

My own mission

At the Sakakibara hot spring, my parents suggested my taking a course of spiritual training at Oomoto. 'You've got nothing to lose', they said.

My home was a meeting place for Oomoto followers, and it seemed there were always meetings going on, but I never joined in any of them. I was very sceptical about religion, believing it had a negative influence on people's lives, exploiting their faith for monetary gain, restricting their freedom with strict commandments, and even launching religious wars.

But coming at this time, when I had come up against the greatest hurdle of my life so far,

even losing hope in living, their suggestion proved to be a turning point in my attitude to religion.

I paid a visit to the Oomoto centre in Kameoka on the railway line west out of Kyoto. From the station I could see the lush wooded grounds in front of me. Entering, I made my way to the main sanctuary with its sweeping tiled roof. This building stands on the site of the sixteenth-century Kameyama Castle, famous as the stronghold of Akechi Mitsuhide, who rebelled against and defeated the Japanese ruler Oda Nobunaga.

In this green setting of luxuriant, mature trees, away from the outside world, I spent 43 days training. Getting up each morning at five o'clock, cleaning the toilets, praying, listening to lectures ... going about everything with a feeling of devotion, I no longer found cleaning the toilets unpleasant. During this time, I felt that I was revealing my true self in the presence of a great though invisible power. Suspending my disbelief, I absorbed everything with an attitude of humility.

In the evenings, I read the series of books *Notes on faith* by Hidemaru Deguchi, the husband of the third spiritual leader. I was struck by the authority of his words, and deeply moved.

'Every human being is born into this world with an important mission that only he or she can carry out.'

Coming to these words, I was moved to tears, and felt myself shaking.

How foolish I was to think of dying. I had been wrong.

'Yes, from now on I'll develop my father's business into one of the best in the world!' I thought.

I felt the courage to live my life to the full rise up inside me. Hidemaru's words 'Positivity is heaven; negativity is hell' became my life's motto.

It was Hidemaru who first brought Esperanto to the attention of Oomoto. While a student at Kyoto University, he saw a newspaper announcement about an Esperanto course at nearby Doshisha University, and passed it on to Onisaburo. This led to the founding of the 'Oomoto Esperanto Study Group' (now the 'Society for the Popularisation of Esperanto') in 1923.

A book of excerpts from *Notes on faith* was published in 1966 under the title *In search of meaning*, and became a best-seller. I must have read my copy hundreds of times, until it fell apart.

Rejection and treasure

My parents started looking for a partner for me.

They arranged a meeting with a young woman who worked at the Oomoto centre. She was of medium build, and radiated grace and generosity. Nothing came of this meeting, however.

I wasn't disheartened. 'Never mind,' I thought, 'there are plenty more fish in the sea!' About six months later, I began seeing an easy-going local girl who wasn't too tall, but this didn't work out either, and we gradually drifted apart.

Another meeting was arranged, this time with the daughter of an Oomoto follower from Shizuoka. I travelled on slow bumpy trains via Okayama and Nagoya, crossing the River Tenryū, which I had crossed before on my scooter, and finally getting off at Shizuoka Station and making my way to her house. I remember her being a thin, rather delicate-looking young woman. I wasn't particularly attracted to her, and in any case by the time I got back home a telegram had already arrived turning me down.

What I remember most about the journey was the awe-inspiring sight of Mount Fuji on the way home, and thinking what a treasure of the world this mountain was, the pride of Japan.

My grandparents, too, had been worrying about my marriage prospects. They had their eye on a girl called Yoshiko Kamada, who was my grandmother's younger sister's granddaughter, and so my second cousin. It seems they had been making moves since before my disappearance.

My grandfather Senzō, having met her four times and decided that she was a sound young woman, brought her in to work for my father's firm, and she and I became colleagues at Swany.

Yoshiko was the fifth daughter of Eikichi and Hideno Kamada, farmers in Nyūnoyama in the village of Fukue, a little way from our home. She was a charming girl, about 155 centimetres tall and slender, three years younger than me, and had gone to Fukue Junior High School. Apparently she knew all about my disappearance.

My grandparents encouraged us to spend time together, inviting us to eat special festival food at their house or on some other pretext.

Yoshiko quickly became skilled at sewing, and presently started accompanying me making the rounds of subcontractors. She was efficient at counting the pieces, loading them on to the truck, and dealing with the subcontractors. Her only fault was that she could sometimes seem slightly aloof.

One day, my grandparents asked me, 'what do you think of Yoshiko?' 'She's a nice girl,' I replied, honestly. 'Well then, you tell her yourself,' my grandfather said.

'Tell her you'll make her happy even though you've got a bad leg. Go on, convince her.'

His urging made me keenly aware how terrified I was of failure. Although I had done spiritual training and thought I had come out of it a new person, I still hadn't got over the trauma of my first heartbreak. That was why all the meetings so far had come to nothing. Even now it moves me to think of how my grandparents recognised my vulnerability and encouraged me.

One evening, I invited Yoshiko to the beach, and lay down beside her. I may not have got full marks, but, helped by the fact that it was dark and we couldn't see each other's faces, I managed to say what my grandfather had told me.

I held her hand and felt no resistance. I was intoxicated by our first, fumbling kiss.

We have now been together more than fifty years. All I can say to my wife is 'thank you.'

3 Finding new markets

The Kagawa glove industry

Kagawa is one of the four prefectures of the island of Shikoku, but it occupies only one-tenth of its area – less than 2000 km^2. Into this area is crowded a population of about a million people, many engaged in making the various local products, which include cotton, sugar, salt, rice, gloves, lacquerware, soy sauce and fans. In recent years, new specialities such as 'olive-fed beef' and 'olive-fed yellowtail fish' have become famous.

Glove-making in Kagawa goes back to a certain Futago Shunrei, who was the priest at the Buddhist Senkōji Temple in Fukue Village. He left his temple and returned to lay life around the turn of the twentieth century, and learned glove-making in Osaka. His apprentice and successor Tatsukichi Tanatsugu returned to Kagawa in 1900 and founded a company called Sekizen Shōkai. This was the first glove factory in the area.

The local industry expanded when large orders came in from Britain during World War I, and Shirotori developed as a 'glove town'. The industry spread to neighbouring Hiketa and Ōchi, and two companies in particular, Osaka Gloves and Tōyō Gloves, became well established in the area. At the close of the war in 1918, it is recorded that the number of pairs of gloves produced was '730,000 dozen'.

The rise of glove-making to the position of top local industry was supported by the dexterity and skill of women workers in cutting, decoration, sewing, and finishing.

In 1950, Emperor Showa visited Shirotori during a tour of Shikoku, and an annual 'glove festival' was initiated to commemorate the event. Exports began to increase again, and the town regained the prosperity of the pre-war years. Conditions took a turn for the worse following the so-called 'Nixon shock', the anti-inflationary measures announced in 1971 by US President Richard Nixon and the subsequent depreciation of the US dollar to ¥200, which damaged the industry's competitiveness, while a rise in labour costs made things worse.

Glove-making being an unavoidably labour-intensive industry, many companies responded by moving their production overseas and, by 2008, 78 firms affiliated to the Japan Gloves Industrial Association, or about 80%, had moved into countries such as China, Vietnam and Indonesia. But the number of businesses has now fallen to fewer than 70, while their combined yearly turnover has dropped from ¥66 billion in 1991 to just ¥35 billion at the time of writing.

As well as being labour-intensive, the glove industry is also saddled with the fact that its core product is a seasonal one that people only buy in the winter months, even allowing for the wide range of specialist products such as skiing gloves, sun-protection gloves, marine gloves, baseball gloves, bridal gloves and so on. Some companies have sought new opportunities in such products as leather wallets and luxury bags and established a brand presence in these areas.

How did Swany, my company, respond to this challenge?

Swany is born

After we started exporting, we came up against the problem of our company name. We couldn't get people abroad to pronounce the old name 'Miyoshi Textiles' correctly - it always came out as 'My-yo-shee' (it should be 'Mee-yo-shee'), and we decided that our brand lacked recognisability.

In 1968, we announced a competition within the company, with a prize for the winner, which resulted in 150 ideas for the new name. The winning entry came from a long-time member of the company, Hatsuo Matsumura. His idea for a new name, 'Swany', came from the name of the town Shirotori (which literally means 'white bird' or 'swan'). Looking in the New York telephone directory, he found many Swanees (as in 'Swanee River'), but no Swany.

Like ‘Sony’, ‘Sunny’ (the Nissan car) and Suntory (the whisky), it was easy to pronounce and had a nice ring to it.

The company had started to penetrate overseas markets in 1959, when it began exporting via an export brokerage company in Kobe. My first trip abroad as a senior executive director came five years later, in 1964. At the same time, the company relocated its premises from our house on the seashore to a site adjoining the Takamatsu-Tokushima railway line, and began to expand rapidly.

I shall come back to these developments in detail later on, but here is an outline of the course of Swany’s history.

1968-70: Swany Ikeda, Swany Tokushima and Swany Kōchi are established, with a production workforce of 200.

1972-78: Swany Korea, Swany Oriental and Swany Asia are established in Korea, with a workforce of 1200 producing gloves of all kinds.

1980: Swany America is established in New York, selling to retail outlets.

1984-89: Swany China, Swany Great Wall, Swany Glove and Swany Taicang are established in three cities in the Shanghai region, with a production force of 1500.

1989: Swany brand skiing gloves go on sale in the USA, reaching annual sales of ¥1 billion. From 2012, sales are the highest in the USA for seven years running.

1997: The body-supporting ‘Swany Bag’ is launched, and becomes a hit product with 110,000 sold every year.

2012: Swany Cambodia is established in Cambodia with about 300 employees, but struggles to remain profitable.

2014: Launch of the world’s smallest folding wheelchair, the ‘Swany Mini’ on the purchasing market, with approximately 1000 sold every year. In 2020, the Swany Mini makes its appearance on the much larger rental market. Japanese, Chinese and US patents obtained.

2018: Swany skiing gloves are launched on the Japanese market. In the dress glove market, the Elmer brand is established.

Revolutionary cost-cutting strategy

The experience of being beaten down on price while out with my father meeting clients made me decide to work on cost reduction. When cutting leather gloves, we used to start by placing a 28-centimetre square glass plate on to a sheet of leather and cutting round it with a knife. Then, we placed a die onto this square, and cut out the glove shape, or ‘trank’, using a pressure cutter. By directly cutting out the trank with the die, dispensing with the process of first cutting round the glass plate, I could reduce the loss of leather, which accounted for 60% of the cost, by 2%, the difference in size between the die and the plate. This streamlining of the cutting process also increased speed, and the whole industry has now come to adopt the same method.

The key to success lay in the technique of cutting the fourchettes – the narrow strips joining the fronts and backs of the fingers – from the leather left over after cutting out the trank. Twelve fourchettes are needed for one pair of gloves. By being creative, it was possible to get three fourchettes from a piece of waste leather that had previously only yielded two, or to get two from another piece that had only been enough for one. Overall, we managed to obtain an increase of 30-40% of fourchettes. This represented a significant additional profit of about 3% on an average net profit for the industry of 4-5%.

When I first got involved in the glove-making process, we had nine cutting machines, large and small. These were fixed to the concrete floor, and connected to the motor by a belt. Because the rotating belt was dangerous, I had the motor fixed on top of the cutting machine

and connected directly by means of a V-belt. Isamu Nakagawa, the head of Nakagawa Iron Works, who undertook the conversion for us, liked my idea, because the machines could be operated safely as soon as the power was connected, and all the machines were converted to my method.

We also improved the finishing process. We used to stretch the gloves over a gas-heated glove-shaped copper plate and stretch the leather so that the fingers were neatly straightened. Then, taking two pairs at a time, we would lay the gloves out on cardboard to a few dozen layers' thickness and cover them with a concrete block, and we would leave them like this until the following morning. This was dangerous, however, as it sometimes fell over.

I created a pedal-operated finishing bench with a 70 kg cast metal weight, which was lifted about 3 cm by pressing down on the pedal so that the neatly straightened gloves could be inserted into the space. About the size of a sewing machine table and made of steel, it had four pedal-operated weights. I took satisfaction in this invention, which expressed my aesthetic sense and my love of machinery.

From this time on, my father took responsibility for negotiating with clients, while I was left in charge of cost control. My father must have been pleased with my performance, because he started saying things like 'If it's Etsuo's idea, it must be right'.

Five years after I started working for the company, I was promoted to Senior Executive Director. The more I applied myself to solving problems, the lower our costs became, and the more gloves we sold. I was enjoying my job.

Murky world of export

The winter of 1958, the year I joined the company, was a mild one, and gloves did not sell. We let all our staff go in January, and for three months the whole industry existed on unemployment benefit, until the whole workforce returned in April.

In an attempt to overcome this predicament, my parents started street selling, and for about a month they travelled around Osaka, Kobe and Okayama, standing on windy street corners calling out 'Gloves! Gloves! Does anyone need any gloves?'

My father went to Kobe every day to try to break into the overseas market, and succeeded in gaining entry to Strong, an export brokerage company, where he was obliged reluctantly to accept the condition of a sweetener of 2% to the section manager in charge. Our first order was for cow skin gloves with rabbit fur lining and with knit lining.

Because Strong were not the makers, they could not reply to the foreign buyers' requests, and so I had to be there at meetings, although I was still an inexperienced youth.

Taking the estimated price in yen of one dozen pairs, I calculated the price with a margin of 30% plus 5% as Strong's commission, and divided this by ¥360 to give the shipping price in dollars. I also learned to say 'FOB Kobe' to indicate how far we were responsible for the goods.

One day, a buyer asked me, in English, 'What do you think?' When I hesitated, he pressed me, 'What is your opinion?' I replied boldly, 'Brown is better than black.' 'You're a smart boy', said the buyer. I felt as if I'd ascended to Heaven. I began to go for lunch with the buyers, and I even went with them to bars and cabarets.

During meetings, I noticed that the buyers were waiting impatiently for me to work out the selling price. After much thought, I devised an index, adding the costs of the face and lining materials, labour and packaging, with our 30% margin and Strong's 5%. Using an abacus for addition and a slide rule for multiplication, I could convert our cost to the selling price in dollars in an instant.

If our margin added on to production cost was 30%, the index when converted at $1=¥360 would be 430%; if 31%, 435%; and if 32%, 440%. While observing the buyers' facial

expressions, I moved the margin rate up and down and noted their reaction. At just the right time, I would press them, saying 'this is a good time to buy'. In this way, I secured orders for 800 or 1000 dozen pairs one after another.

Having achieved one result, I would move to the next style. While the jokes were flying around, I would ask how many styles they were planning to buy, trying to get as big a contract as possible.

When the buyers came visiting, people from rival companies would be there at Strong's office, bearing samples. Sometimes I had to compete with them, and I would tremble, fearful that the section manager in charge would be bombarded with sweeteners.

On the day of a meeting with Milton Schwartz, CEO of Avon Glove Corporation of New York, four companies did the entertaining. After dinner, we took him to a cabaret, and there was a woman who spoke English well.

Milton was charmed by this woman with her fair complexion and slender face and her fluent English. I was a bit uneasy about her having been brought along for ¥1000 each from the four companies. I have no memory of how the section manager's sweetener or the unreceipted expenses were accounted for. Many times I have wanted to ask my father if there wasn't a slightly more reputable way of doing business – but he is no longer around to ask.

Business world tour

In 1964, the year of the Tokyo Olympics, restrictions on overseas travel were lifted, and I went abroad for the first time. The maximum $500 in foreign currency we were allowed to take out of the country would not cover the cost of interpreting, and I made daily trips to the Takamatsu Branch of the Bank of Japan to get $2000 (¥720,000). With my round-the-world ticket, which cost about ¥700,000, I took off from Haneda Airport in Tokyo, a bundle of nerves.

The next morning, after arriving in New York, I went to a café next to the Prince George Hotel where I was staying, and asked for 'hot milk, toast, and lemon tea'. The waitress didn't seem to understand a word of this, so I repeated it over and over again, getting redder in the face each time. While this was going on, a Japanese student came in, and, seeing that I was having trouble, corrected my Japanese English for me: '*hat* milk, *tea with lemon*'. By this time, I was dripping with sweat.

I went to the towering Chamber of Commerce building with my interpreter, who I had hired through the travel agent for $25 a day (about ¥9000). There, a huge middle-aged man with a ruddy complexion searched for glove companies for me, and gave me a list of about 30 companies, with telephone numbers. I was impressed with how courteously he helped me, a complete stranger from Japan.

First, I called the NY Merchandise Company from a public telephone. At first, they said that they weren't interested in importing because they only sold in small quantities, but my interpreter persisted, 'we'll only take five minutes of your time.' We met the boss, a short mild-mannered man who seemed very pleasant, but he just glanced at my samples and showed no interest, and we were out of there in just ten minutes.

I was turned down again at the next company we visited, and we then turned to the third company on our list, Gelmart, a company selling knitted gloves. Here, too, I was told 'we're not interested in leather gloves'. But when I showed them my samples, they said, 'Why don't you take these to IBC?' and kindly wrote down the company's address and the CEO's name. Unfortunately, the CEO was away on business, so I just made a note of the company for a future visit.

I struggled to get an appointment at the fourth company, only to find that they only sold work gloves. In nine days I approached 30 companies, and got to meet with fewer than a third of them. Many were businesses dealing in work gloves or knitted gloves. These were the only

ones they found for me in the Companies Yearbook, so there was nothing I could do. Of those I did meet, only NY Merchandise eventually opened an account with us some years later.

Disappointed at the miserable result of my efforts in New York, I left for Germany, on a Pan Am flight bound for Hamburg. There were no other Japanese passengers on board. I made my way to the toilet, and, not knowing that the lock was broken, touched the door causing it to swing open. An angry woman's voice yelled from inside 'How dare you!' to my great embarrassment.

At the Hotel Atlantic on the banks of Lake Alster, unable to read the German or English names of the dishes on the menu, I pointed to the first item, and was brought some vegetable soup. I then tried the second item, and this time I was brought a consommé. Thinking it was time for the main course, I tried pointing at the bottom item, and was informed 'That's the name of the restaurant'.

That night, I got into bed, but I immediately started worrying about whether I could find an interpreter the next day, and I ended up even worrying if I would ever be able to return home to Japan. I couldn't sleep at all because of my jet lag. By the time morning came, I was in tears.

While in Hamburg, I visited the Chamber of Commerce with my interpreter, who, I was told, was 'a former trading company employee'. Armed with a list of about ten companies who looked likely to be in the glove business, I spent the next two days visiting them, but not one was interested in importing gloves.

Not far from the hotel, I discovered a sign with the name 'Kogetsu' in Japanese characters. It turned out to be a Japanese restaurant, very rare in those days. With great excitement, I went in, and ate a meal of sashimi. On the shelf was a row of Japanese books like the samurai novel *Musashi* by Eiji Yoshikawa, and businessmen were reading them absorbedly.

At my next destination, London, I ran around in the same way, but failed to find any potential customers. In deep despondency, I flew on to my final destination, Milan in Italy. In my bathroom at the Meridian Hotel where I stayed, I sat astride the washbasin next to the toilet and turned the tap. A jet of boiling hot water shot up, giving me a nasty scald. I should have used the cold tap to adjust the temperature of the water. I was stinging for a few days afterwards, but fortunately I managed to get back to Japan in one piece.

In the lonely month I spent travelling, I had struggled with the language barrier, different food, jet lag and culture shock. Arriving back at Haneda, I felt as if my feet weren't touching the ground, as if I were sleepwalking.