

The Journalist

September 21, 1874 – 6th Year of Meiji

Some time ago, I undertook to write a comprehensive article on the life of Hijikata Toshizo for my newspaper, the *Hotaru Shinbun*.¹ In December, the paper will be printing an expose on the life of Katsu Kaishu,² a hero of the Meiji Restoration that put the emperor back into power.³ My editor suggested that I write a piece on Hijikata, another supporter of the shogun, to offset it. Hijikata I consider to be the worst of traitors, but the Katsu story had been given to someone else, and as usual, I was stuck with the less glamorous assignment. Nevertheless, if it's good enough *maybe* I'll have a shot at the government correspondent position that just opened up. In this journal I will record the results of my interviews with Katsura Kogoro, Nagakura Shinpachi and one other anonymous source.

Luckily, the first person I asked to interview, Katsura Kogoro,⁴ one of the “Three Great Nobles of the Restoration,”⁵ agreed to sit down with me and chat over tea about the chaotic years in Kyoto before the Restoration. I counted myself highly privileged. I had to use every connection in my arsenal to finally get permission to interview him.

¹ The newspaper that published Nagakura Shinpachi's oral memoirs of the Shinsengumi. The reporter is fictional, though.

² Commissioner of the Tokugawa navy. He was a pacifist and considered an expert on Western things. He negotiated the surrender of Edo castle to the Imperial forces in 1867, saving Edo from being swallowed up by war.

³ This refers to the 1867 revolution in which the Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown and the emperor was “restored to power.” A great deal of the fighting took place on the streets of Kyoto between supporters of the shogunate and *roshi*. In 1853, Commodore Perry's fleet appeared in the Tokyo Bay off the coast of Uraga and demanded that Japan open its doors to the outside world, causing a big stir in the previously insulated country. The Tokugawa shogunate was eventually forced into unfair trade agreements with the United States. Many Japanese believed that the shogunate was weak and cowardly for making these concessions. Many samurai left their domains and flocked to the imperial capitol of Kyoto, causing chaos on its streets. Assassination was rampant. The angry loyalists would kill shogunate officials left and right and plant their heads on stakes down by the Kamo River, claiming “divine retribution.”

⁴ Representative of the Choshu clan (loyalists). He later held a dominant position in the Meiji oligarchy – and later, was an advocate of constitutional government.

⁵ The other two were Okubo Toshimichi and Saigo Takamori.

I'd heard of Katsura when I was growing up in Kyoto. I was still very much a child during those years, but I still had some grasp of what was going on. The streets of Kyoto were teeming with angry *roshi*⁶ advocating *Sonno Joi* – “expel the foreigners, revere the emperor.” They wanted to depose the shogunate and place the emperor back at the head of the state. Murder on the streets seemed like an everyday occurrence. I remembered those times as both terrifying and thrilling, watching history unfold around me.

Katsura was much talked about back then, and all the stories circulated of his grand heroism appealed to my romantic sensibilities. I would hear how Katsura had just narrowly escaped the Shinsengumi⁷ or of his other daring exploits with the rest of the imperial loyalists. I had always wanted to meet him and this recent assignment seemed like the perfect opportunity. In the end, it happened that a friend of a friend whose cousin had worked for him as a secretary when he was an Imperial Councilor talked to him for me and told him about the article I was writing. Katsura had taken interest immediately. Apparently, he had a thing or two to say about Hijikata – as I would imagine. Nevertheless, I am truly honored that one of the most progressive and modern-minded thinkers of our time agreed to indulge me. Hopefully, I can glean enough insight from Katsura to write an article that people will actually want to read.

When I finally arrived at Katsura's – I'd never been in such a big house before – I was shown to his study by one of the house staff. His shelves were piled high with books and a world map was mounted over the mantle. Katsura had been to all the places I had only read about in books and newspapers like the United States and Europe. His mantle and shelves were also littered with what I thought must be souvenirs from his travels. Except for a pair of

⁶ A nicer term for ronin or masterless samurai.

⁷ The Shinsengumi were a group of expert swordsmen under the military commissioner of Kyoto, who policed the streets of Kyoto during the chaos. They had been uniquely recruited without regards to social class. Hijikata served as a vice commander to the Shinsengumi.

Japanese swords tastefully displayed on a wall wrack, I thought I must have been transported to another place entirely. We sat across each from each other in overstuffed arm chairs. Katsura himself – dressed in a traditional kimono and *haori*⁸ – looked somewhat out of place in his western-style study.

After exchanging the obligatory small talk, I began to question Katsura about his years in Kyoto. He'd acted as a liaison between the Choshu clan and its radical elements in Kyoto. He did his best to describe to me the political environment at the time. The Shinsengumi, charged with policing the imperial capitol, captured and killed many of the loyalist *roshi*. "In those times," Katsura said, "we were considered rebels, but it was the deteriorating shogunate, and those like the Shinsengumi who foolishly clung to it, who were in defiance of imperial order."⁹ Many of my comrades ended up on the blades of those wolves, and their 'demon vice commander'¹⁰ was among the worst of them, as likely to turn on his own than the enemy." Katsura explained to me that the Shinsengumi were *roshi* themselves, little better than those they were charged to apprehend. Some of them were not even samurai to begin with. Hijikata Toshizo and the Shinsengumi's commander, Kondo Isami, were actually peasant farmers by birth. "Hijikata was an ambitious social climber," Katsura told me. "He'd eliminate anyone who got in his way."¹¹

Katsura had frequently found himself on the run from the Shinsengumi. I asked him if he'd ever crossed swords with Hijikata, personally. Katsura nodded slowly. "Briefly," he admitted, taking a moment to resettle himself. "Early in '64, the Shinsengumi raided one of our

⁸ A half-coat.

⁹ In 1863, an imperial order was issued for the shogun to expel the foreigners, but since this was simply not possible, it was used as a reason to get people to turn against the Tokugawa shogunate.

¹⁰ An epithet for Hijikata because of his bloody reputation and strict command of the Shinsengumi.

¹¹ In 1865, as a result of his own draconian troop regulations, Hijikata was forced to sentence vice commander Yamanami Keisuke to *seppuku* for desertion. Yamanami was one of his closest friends.

safe houses in the city where many of the loyalist *roshi* were hiding out. Several of us were escaping out the back when he and several others surprised us. I didn't find out until later who it was I was up against. I definitely was grateful to be alive. He was very resolved...and skilled," Katsura said grudgingly, "but I just hadn't pictured him being so small."

Katsura seemed to become restless at this point in our interview, so I finished my tea and took my leave of him, thanking him profusely, of course, for the interview.

September 29, 1874 – 6th Year of Meiji

My second interviewee was somewhat harder to track down. He'd married and understandably taken his wife's name.¹² The sole survivor from the original core of the Shinsengumi,¹³ Nagakura Shinpachi, finally agreed to talk with me about Hijikata's early years. He was hesitant because he had spoken with a journalist before and felt that his accounts had been sensationalized.¹⁴ He began to tell me about the "old days" at the Shiei Fencing Hall.¹⁵ Hijikata, he said, had not officially enrolled there until 1859. Before then, he had always dropped in and out. "There was something different about him," Nagakura mused. "A lot of us felt this at the time, but we couldn't quite say what it was. . . Whenever he came to practice with

¹² It was actually pretty common for a man to take the name of his wife's family.

¹³ The original core leadership of the Shinsengumi who first came to Kyoto as the Roshi Corps – was from Kondo's training hall. Kondo was a fencing instructor. Among his students besides Hijikata Toshizo were most notably Okita Soji, Nagakura Shinpachi, Todo Heisuke, Harada Sanosuke, and Yamanami Keisuke (the Shinsengumi's other, more passive vice commander). Hijikata, Okita and Yamanami were his assistant instructors. They came from an area called Tama in the Edo countryside. Tama fell under Tokugawa lands, so they were not under the authority of any *daimyo*. The people of Tama were relatively self-governing and extremely loyal to the Tokugawa *bakufu*. When the *bakufu* was recruiting *roshi* to clean up the streets of Kyoto, they enlisted. But as it turned out, many of the *roshi* recruited were anti-*bakufu* and Kondo's group broke off from them.

¹⁴ Nagakura's actual interview was not until 1911. A great deal of information on the Shinsengumi comes from that interview and his written memoirs.

¹⁵ Kondo's training hall.

us at the Shiei Hall, we would all sit up long into evening to watch Hijikata and another student, Okita,¹⁶ play chess.¹⁷ We all respected him; he was obviously very intelligent.”

Nagakura then told me how Hijikata supported himself selling his family's Ishida¹⁸ medicine powder from town to town. While traveling he wrote poetry and practiced his fencing, asking for instruction in any reputable fencing school he came across, determined that he would someday become a samurai. I had trouble picturing this, but Nagakura told me that when Hijikata was young, he was actually very quiet, polite and pretty...in kind of a feminine way...so wherever he went he was treated well. This was quite contrary to what I had been led to believe about Hijikata as he was usually described as imposing, if not frightening, in appearance.

Nagakura remembered the first year that he and the other members of the Fencing Hall spent in Kyoto. Serizawa Kamo, a Shinsengumi commander and a samurai of the Mito clan,¹⁹ was also in Kyoto at the time. Nagakura told me that Serizawa had a terrible temper and would snap at a moment's provocation. Nowadays, we'd say that the syphilis had gone to his brain.²⁰ He set fire to a wholesale silk dealer, extorted money from townspeople, and had a penchant for stealing other men's wives.

Once when some serving girl in a Shimabara²¹ teahouse dared to refuse him, Serizawa flew into a rage and trashed the place. Nagakura, who was accompanying him, had had the foresight to ask Hijikata to make an appearance. To prevent matters from becoming worse,

¹⁶ A fencing prodigy and Kondo's star student. He was like a brother to Hijikata – although sometimes it is suggested that they were lovers. He was the best swordsman in the Shinsengumi with the only possible exception of Saito Hajime. He died the same year as Hijikata after a long battle with tuberculosis.

¹⁷ *Shogi* – sort of like chess.

¹⁸ Hijikata's home village. His father died before he was born and his mother died when he was five. As boy, he divided his time between his elder brother's home in Ishida and his sister's in Hino.

¹⁹ A branch of the Tokugawa family.

²⁰ It is believed that he did in fact have syphilis.

²¹ The red-light district of Kyoto.

Hijikata attempted to placate Serizawa. It seemed like Serizawa would kill both the women for their insult, and Hijikata sought some way to protect them from Serizawa's wrath. "He did have five sisters, after all," Nagakura reminded me. Finally, after many threats, Serizawa said he would forgive them since they were just women. Instead of killing them, he would cut off their hair as punishment.²² Hijikata, however, did not trust Serizawa not to kill them once his sword was out and insisted that *he* do it. Hijikata calmly took his short sword and sliced off their hair. "We all knew it wasn't over, though. Hijikata would not forget Serizawa's transgressions," Nagakura said. It seems our Hijikata had strong ideas about bushido, and, though he kept it hidden, there was a chivalrous side to him.

According to the way that Nagakura tells it, Hijikata and Kondo – who had come from much humbler peasant roots – had been tired of Serizawa's overwhelming sense of entitlement for a long time. He and Kondo later hosted a dinner for Serizawa and his men. Although Serizawa ought to have been suspicious of them by this point, a party was still a party. Hijikata made sure Serizawa's sake cup was filled again and again until he was very drunk. When they had all gone to sleep, Hijikata left. That night, four masked assassins stole into the Yagi residence²³ where Serizawa and his men were staying. In the morning, the entire faction, including Serizawa, was found dead. There was blood streaked all over the walls and ceiling. The Yagi family was so terrified that none of them would ever identify the assassins to the authorities.²⁴ "It was about time someone did something about that evil man," Nagakura said. "He was getting away with way too much until Hijikata decided to take matters into his own hands."

²² It was considered a great shame for a woman to have her hair cut off.

²³ The home of the Yagi family. They owned part of the grounds on which the Shinsengumi's headquarters were situated.

²⁴ The assassins were of course Hijikata, Kondo, Okita Soji, and a fourth person who may either have been Saito, Nagakura or Yamanami. For this case, we're assuming it was Nagakura.

Failing to conceal my morbid fascination, I scribbled furiously as Nagakura related this story, pausing only when my hand began to cramp. He agreed to let me interview him again at a later date.

November 11, 1874 – 6th Year of Meiji

Today, I continued my interview with Nagakura. Since I did have a deadline to meet, I prompted him to skip ahead.

As I was hoping, he began to tell me about the important event that solidified the Shinsengumi's fame – or rather infamy – as the *bakufu*'s most dreaded police force. In June of 1864, in a raid on a hideout of loyalist Choshu *roshi*, the Shinsengumi uncovered a stockpile of weapons and correspondences. The man responsible for hiding the loyalists, Furutaka Shuntaro, also fell into the hands of the Shinsengumi. Nagakura told me that he [Nagakura] and another corpsman had interrogated Furutaka, but the loyalist was determined to die without saying a word.

Nervousness crept into Nagakura's voice as he related how Hijikata had lost patience with their lack of success in getting Furutaka to talk and decided to interrogate him personally. Hijikata hung him upside down from the ceiling, drove nails through the bottoms of his feet. He placed a lit candle over each of the holes and let the hot wax drip down his legs. Furutaka lasted for half an hour longer before he cracked and confessed the rebels' plans to the demon vice commander. This sounded like the Hijikata I had heard so much about. Furutaka told Hijikata that the Choshu loyalists planned to set a fire upwind of the imperial palace, setting Kyoto aflame. In the midst of the chaos, they planned to rescue the emperor and move the imperial seat

of power to Choshu. As a result of this information, the Shinsengumi were able to prevent the destruction of Kyoto and the kidnapping of the emperor.

Though I pressed him to go on, I sensed that Nagakura had said all he was going to say on the subject of Hijikata. At this point, I took the opportunity to end the long interview. Still unsure of where all of this was going, I left the home of Nagakura Shinpachi with my next interview already occupying my mind.

November 15, 1874 – 6th Year of Meiji

This last and final interviewee proved even more elusive than Nagakura. He finally agreed under the condition I would not print his name.²⁵ We sat outside on a narrow porch overlooking the Tama River. It was still unseasonably warm for autumn and the far bank of the river looked like it was aflame, littered with bright red and yellow leaves. He'd only been about seventeen at the time, serving as Hijikata's attendant. We discussed many things, including the Ikedaya Affair and the execution of Kondo, the commander of the Shinsengumi and Hijikata's childhood friend, in 1868. The attendant had been with Hijikata when he'd gone to see Katsu Kaishu in Edo to get him to stop the execution. Unfortunately, Kaishu would not listen to Hijikata. Later, they went north to Aizu with four others from the original Shinsengumi, joining three thousand of the oppositionist troops as they fled Edo in the wake of the surrender. The vice commander did not even flinch when he learned of Kondo's beheading. "He hid his emotions well," the attendant remarked. "He could not let his troops see even the slightest bit of sorrow in him. They could so easily have lost all hope."

²⁵ This interviewee is based on Hijikata's page, Ichimura Tetsunosuke, who joined the Shinsengumi in 1867. However, I am using him as if he had been with them longer than that.

Continuing his story, the attendant told me of Hijikata's being given command of one of the units on the way north to Utsonomiya. His officers estimated a month-long campaign, but against all expectations, Hijikata led the oppositionists to a victory against the better armed and better trained imperial forces in only one day. "He was a brilliant military commander," the attendant said with a sigh. He then recalled an incident during the battle when one of the men, terrified of the odds, had tried to flee, and Hijikata cut the young man down in a single slash.

Later in the battle, Hijikata was shot in the foot, and the attendant carried him on his back all the way back to Aizu. Luckily, he said, Hijikata was small (only five feet and seven inches) and relatively light. Otherwise, they would not have made it all that way. While convalescing in Aizu, Hijikata called his attendant to him. The attendant was shocked when Hijikata handed him a packet of money and told him to see that the young soldier was taken back to his family and given a proper burial. "It was a pitiful thing he'd done to him, he told me. There were tears in his eyes."

He then recounted how Hijikata had rejoined the oppositionists along with the remains of the Pacification Corps after they had been driven farther north. For a long time he had known it was a hopeless fight. "He told me that after two and a half centuries of the Tokugawa *bakufu's* rule, it didn't seem right for it to go down without a fight; someone ought to be willing to go down with it. If he were to face Kondo after death, he could not give up."

The oppositionist forces were pushed north to occupy the island of Ezo²⁶ where they set up base in the city of Hakodate, establishing the Republic of Ezo.²⁷ Though now in command of

²⁶ Modern day Hokkaido.

²⁷ Influenced by ideals of the French revolution – they had French military advisors – the oppositionists established the Republic of Ezo where they hoped they could keep true to their samurai traditions. They elected their officials by popular vote. Hijikata was made vice commissioner of the army. The Republic of Ezo was even provisionally

now over 2,300 men, Hijikata was not permitted to participate in the oppositionists' war council. "Despite everything, they still saw him as a peasant among lords and *bushi*,"²⁸ the attendant said, and as he spoke, he sounded tired, as if dragging up the old memories was somehow physically taxing even now. And yet, in every battle, Hijikata continually placed himself in the line of fire. He remarked often that he should already be dead.

By mid-April of 1869, the imperial forces were closing in on the tiny Republic of Ezo. Hijikata, still determined to die, led 230 men against over 600 enemy soldiers in defense of the citadel at Hakodate. After sixteen long hours of fighting, he finally forced the enemy to retreat. During breaks in the fighting, Hijikata walked through the camp handing out cups of sake to encourage his troops. In May, a combined attack of the imperial forces drove the oppositionists back to Hakodate. The night before what would be known as the Battle of Hakodate, Hijikata called his attendant to him again. He ordered him to get on the next boat to Edo.²⁹ The attendant was determined to die with him and refused to go, but Hijikata got angry and threatened to kill him right there. The attendant acquiesced and Hijikata gave him his two swords, his death poem, and a lock of his long hair from before he had cut off his topknot³⁰ to bring back to Hijikata's family in Hino. On May 11, 1869, Hijikata was shot and killed while falling back to defend the city in the Battle of Hakodate.³¹ He was only thirty-four years old. The attendant returned to Hino, where he lived with Hijikata's sister's³² family for a number of years. By the time we

recognized by Britain and France. They petitioned the Meiji government to be allowed to stay in Ezo to continually protect it as Japan's northern frontier, but their requests were denied.

²⁸ Men of the samurai class.

²⁹ Yokohama, actually.

³⁰ Hijikata supposedly had very long hair, but he cut it off after his defeat at the Battle of Toba-Fushimi where the war started to turn in favor of the imperialists. After that, he began dressing in western military attire.

³¹ His body was never found.

³² He had three or four older sisters.

finished talking, it was late and I had long ago missed my train back to Tokyo³³ and so in the end, the former attendant extended his hospitality and insisted I stay over and take the next train in the morning. I accepted.

November 16, 1874 – 6th Year of Meiji

The next morning, with still a few hours until my train, I walked along the Tama River taking in the sights and smells of my subject's home town. I thought about the article I must soon begin to write with much trepidation. I had come very far from my first initial interview with Katsu in Tokyo and then to Nagakura in Kyoto and finally back to Tama. Although, I still essentially agreed with Katsu, I couldn't quite regard my subject as completely wrong, a stubborn anachronism to modern times. Even Katsu, I thought, respected him on some level. Although raised on heroes like Katsura,³⁴ Hijikata's life and death had some grudging instinctual appeal to me. I'd been so caught up I hadn't thought about the government correspondent position in weeks. It had been my goal in writing the whole piece in the first place. Now it just seems trivial.

Looking at the red maple leaves strewn about the rice paddies, I imagine it as the boy, Toshi,³⁵ must have seen it – like droplets of blood strewn across a battlefield where similar anachronisms fought and died on principle alone.³⁶ The introspective boy with a passion for fencing and poetry has taken up residence in my mind and refused to go home defeated. I am unable to separate the commander who killed the young soldier for trying to flee from same one

³³ The journalist is in Hino, a suburb of Tokyo (the former Edo), located in the Tama region.

³⁴ See footnote 2.

³⁵ Short for Toshizo.

³⁶ Today, Hijikata Toshizo is considered a hero. He and the dreaded Shinsengumi have been heavily romanticized in books and movies. Despite that winners may inevitably skew history in favor of their own rightness, Hijikata survives as a quintessential Japanese hero: far from pure, but willing to die for his convictions with no thought towards personal gain.

who cried for him later. Nor can I separate him from the man who defended the two women in the teahouse from his own commander. This man and Furutaka's tormentor were one in the same. Instead, what I am left with is a living, breathing picture of someone both deeply flawed and deeply human.

"Though my body may decay on the island of Ezo

My spirit guards my lord in the east."

--Hijikata Toshizo, 1869, Hakodate, Ezo

Works Cited

Cullen, L. M. A History of Japan, 1582-1941 : Internal and External Worlds. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003.

Hillsborough, Romulus. Shinsengumi: The Shogun's Last Samurai Corps. Tokyo: Tuttle, 2005.

© 2009 Emily Shelly

"The Journalist" by Emily Shelly won second prize in the University of Pittsburgh's 2008-09 Composition Program Writing Contest

Judges' Commentary on "The Journalist"