

## Yoel Hoffmann's Days in Kyoto, 1970-74

Mariko Tsujita

In November 1970, Yoel Hoffmann began his second long-term stay in Japan, and for the first time along with his family. He found a two-story traditional Japanese residence with a large garden, in a quiet, well-to-do neighborhood in Sagano, on the north-western edge of Kyoto, and lived on its second floor in two rooms, one an 8 *tatami* and the other a 4.5 *tatami* room with a large *oshiire* (built-in closet). They had their own small kitchen on the first floor, and shared a toilet and *goemon-buro*, the traditional Japanese iron cup-ball bath (like a deep giant pot placed on smoldering wood), with other boarders.

At that time, in the western part of Kyoto there was neither an organized sewage network nor flushing toilets, so the tiny luxury for them was to sit on a western style white plastic pan, installed especially for them, over the traditional Japanese basin. Thus, they started living “normal” everyday Japanese life of the times.

One year later, the Hoffmanns moved to live in the Buddhist Temple *Sanbo-ji*. This was not a Zen temple, but a temple of the Nichiren Sect, located north of their former residence, about 700 meters from the bus station of *Sanbo-ji mae*. Even now, this temple stands isolated from the neighborhood, sitting alone in the mountains. It is easy to imagine how detached it was then. But it must surely have provided an ideal environment for meditation.

The period in which they lived in Japan was right after the Japan-US Security Treaty had been extended. In most universities, non-sect students of *Zenkyoto* movement, together with protesters against the Japan-US Security Treaty, challenged the hierarchical and authoritarian establishment of their universities. With the automatic extension of the treaty in 1970, there was a feeling of setback and fatigue in most university campuses, due to the obvious defeat with no significant trophy to show for the struggle, and not knowing where to continue next.

At the same time, activists of the established radical sects became more radicalized. Some went underground, and there were those who organized their base outside Japan, later to be called “The Japanese Red Army”. After the Lod Airport massacre (May 30, 1972), the Black September attack at the Munich Olympic Games (September 5, 1972), and the Yom Kippur War (October, 1973), Japanese police paid special attention to the security of Israelis living in Japan. After receiving

information in May 1974 that the Japanese Red Army might attack Israeli citizens, to mark the Lod attack, the Japanese Police warned all Israelis living in Japan to seek a secure place to live. Since the date of the Hoffmanns' departure had been set for June 25, they decided to tour Japan first, visiting Japanese friends in Kyoto, Akashi, Takahama, and other places before leaving.

After their return to Israel Yoel revisited Japan for several long periods. In 1975 he lived in Katada, Otsu, working on a dictionary of Buddhist Philosophy, and in 1988, Yoel and some of his family members revisited Kyoto and stayed in Otsu for six months.

**Boarding house where Yoel Hoffmann and his family lived (renovated recently)**



**Cherry Blossom in the neighborhood**





**Sambo-ji Temple: Path leading to the temple**



**Sambo-ji Temple: Main Hall**

