



Photo by Yasuki Iizuka

Homecoming by JACKSON SELLERS



FROM the Tokyo area, follow the Tone River into Gunma Prefecture. The wide valley created by the Tone runs between the Haruna and Akagi mountain ranges. At Shibukawa, where the Agatsuma River joins the Tone, you'll run smack into the Komochi Mountains, which are shown above in a photograph taken by a nephew. This is our home in Japan. Shibukawa boasts of being the geographical center of the Japanese archipelago, and the small city has reached out in recent years to embrace both Komochi Village, where Yoshi and her sisters grew up, and the famous Ikaho spa town, where Yoshi and I always stay. At bottom left, the four Iizuka sisters smile at the camera in the winter of 1944-45. From left to right are Misao, Kazuko, Toshiko and Yoshi. In the photo just above, octogenarians Misao and Kazuko join us for a *kaiseki* dinner in our suite at Ikaho's Kishigon Inn. Ailing Toshiko could not come on this November 2007 evening. At the low table, Jackson and his sisters-in-law are sitting on *zaise*, or half-chairs, while Yoshi's pillow, barely seen at lower left, lies on the *tatami* floor. She is the



youngest among us and her legs are in better shape. The next day called for an obligatory visit to the old homestead. At right, something catches Yoshi's finger-pointing attention as the sisters emerge from the Kishigon *ryokan*. The Iizuka compound, still owned by the Iizuka family, lies next to a stream in the foothills of the Komochi Mountains. The photo at middle right shows a portion of it. The white structure with exposed beams is what's called a *nagayamon*, or "long gate house." It was refurbished nearly a decade ago and can be seen now as a modern country villa. Yoshi, her parents and her sisters lived in the *nagayamon*, while the big house with the reddish roof, partially shown in the photo, housed Yoshi's grandparents, her two brothers and a few household servants. This house has stood for more than 200 years and probably looks much like its predecessor, which also stood for a couple of centuries. For that reason, it gets considerable attention from Japanese architectural students. The Iizukas are ancient residents here. I am just a *gaijin* in-law, but my name – *Jyaku Serāzu*, or "Jack Sellers" as rendered in *katakana* – can be found somewhere in the Iizuka family records at a Buddhist temple just up the mountain. Yoshi's father ordered it put there after she and I were married. At bottom right, Yoshi and Kazuko light incense sticks in the Iizuka cemetery down the hill from the family compound. All tombstones visible in this photo, plus many that are not, stand in memory of Iizukas, multiple Iizukas in many cases. A chamber below the memorial stone with the fresh-cut flowers holds the ashes of Yoshi's parents and her oldest brother. The white stone just beyond is for her grandparents. And so on





Village Postscript

This “Homecoming” story starts at Shibukawa’s Ikaho spa town in the Haruna Mountains and ends at the Iizaka family compound in Shibukawa’s Komochi Village in the foothills of the Komochi Mountains. Above is a Komochi Village photo sent to me by nephew Yasuki Iizuka. Its main focus is a thatched-roof house, but its background shows a partial sweep of the Haruna mountain range where Ikaho’s iron-rich hot springs are located. On annual trips to Shibukawa, Yoshi and I spend our time in these two outlying villages, with occasional visits to the downtown homes of Yoshi’s sisters. In “Homecoming,” there is mention of Yoshi’s grandfather, whose grave lies in the family cemetery. His name was Ginai Iizuka, and he was a *kendo* swordsman of first rank. He killed more than 30 charging Russian soldiers – *with a sword!* – in Manchuria during the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War. I don’t believe it, and Yoshi can’t conceive of her kindly grandpa being capable of such a thing, but the story is told in a Japanese book about Gunma Prefecture swordsmen. Anyway, Ginai’s disciples erected a monument to him in Komochi Village. At right, on a rainy day during an earlier visit, Yoshi poses next to her grandpa’s monument, which honors him as a *kendo* master.

