

Mr. K and Me

By JACKSON SELLERS

We are old men, Mr. K and I. He is 94 and I am 72, but we can still be boys together. In the spring of 2002, several months before the spiffy 350Z came out, he and I traveled by chauffeured car, courtesy of Nissan Motors, from Tokyo to Yokosuka, and we chatted like boys along the way. The trip made me nostalgic for reasons that had nothing to do with cars. When I was a young naval officer nearly 50 years ago, my ship often tied up at Yokosuka on the Miura Peninsula south of the capital, and the small Tokyo Bay city became the exotic seaport of my youth. Mr. K was feeling good that day, too. After forging his international reputation as father of the Datsuns and Z-cars in the 1960s and '70s, and after two full decades of being a legendary Nissan retiree, Yutaka Katayama was rejoining the payroll, that very day, as an official advisor on Z-car marketing and promotion. The famous Z was back, and so was Mr. K. Both had been on the sidelines for a while. Here, we were visiting the Nissan Oppama plant that would produce all of those eagerly awaited Zs. At the plant in Yokosuka's outskirts, we got a grand tour of highly automated assembly lines. The plant's general manager, Yoshitaka Shimada, shared his impressive expertise with us. Mr. K nudged me: "His father used to work for me." We giggled about it. The same thing had happened to



me in my long newspaper career. When we left, Mr. Shimada gave us identical gifts, nicely wrapped and intriguingly heavy. Hardly before we were out of the parking lot, I tore open mine. It was an exquisite model of a 1934 Datsun (now displayed in my library as shown in the photo at lower left). "Oh good," said Mr. K, "I don't have that one." We laughed together again. Two boys were finding joy in a toy car. The feature article that came out of our Yokosuka trip was published by the *Los Angeles Times* in August of 2002. "Mr. K and the Z Are Back," the headline said. As it happened, Mr. K was in Los Angeles that day in connection with the 350Z's official debut, and his "lifetime American secretary," Johnnie Gable of Bellflower, snapped the photo above. In his newborn Nissan work, Mr. K often displays the *Times* article mounted on hardboard. While I was in Japan this time, he asked me to autograph it. I was pleased to do so, writing: "We had a good time, didn't we?" Two old men shook warm hands, and grinned like the boys they were.

It was November 10, 2003, our first full day in Japan, and Eiichi Shimizu, identifying himself as Mr. K's executive secretary, came to pick us up at Tokyo's Century Hyatt Hotel. Michelle and Stewart Moore, Lake Forest neighbors, were with us. We were headed for Setagaya Ward, an hour away, where we would have lunch with Mr. K, Mrs. K, their son Mitsuo and a Komazawa Women's University professor, Shozo Usami, a good friend who has been extraordinarily helpful in my attempts to understand the history and culture of Japan. This was Michelle and Stewart's first trip to Japan, the first anywhere outside the United States, except for jaunts to Third-World Mexico. They were thrilled to dine with the famous Mr. K, father of the Nissan Z-cars, three of which Michelle had driven. Stewart, too, had an indirect relationship with Mr. K, although a culinary one. It was his Texas-style pork ribs that the nonagenarian savored at a dinner party at my Southern California home. "Finger-licking good," Mr. K declared.



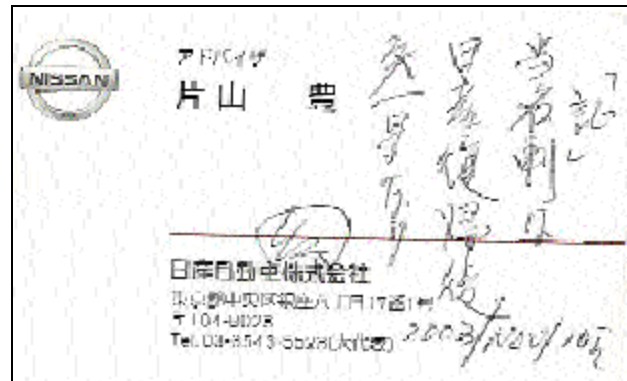
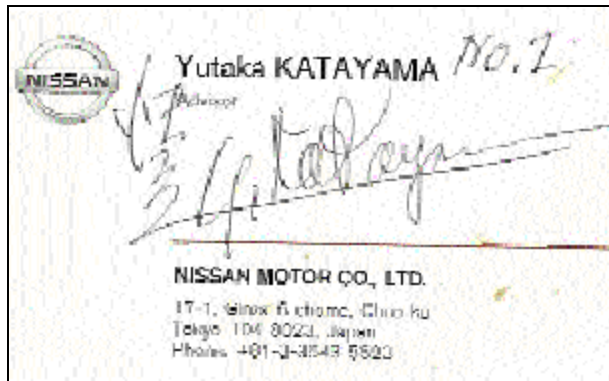
I had met Mrs. K before, both in America and Japan, but this was the first time I had an opportunity to take her photograph. Masako and Mr. K have been married for 66 years, and they have four grown children and a number of grandchildren. Compared to her tall, burly husband, she is a tiny woman, even tiny when compared to Yoshi.



At Mr. K's spacious office, Shozo waves playfully at the camera, while I remain fixed on what Mr. K is saying on the other side of the dining table. Mr. K was explaining why he chose "Eureka" as the name of his office building a mile or so from his Setagaya home. You see, "Eureka" was the proud cry of Archimedes when he discovered a way to determine the purity of gold. *I have found it!*



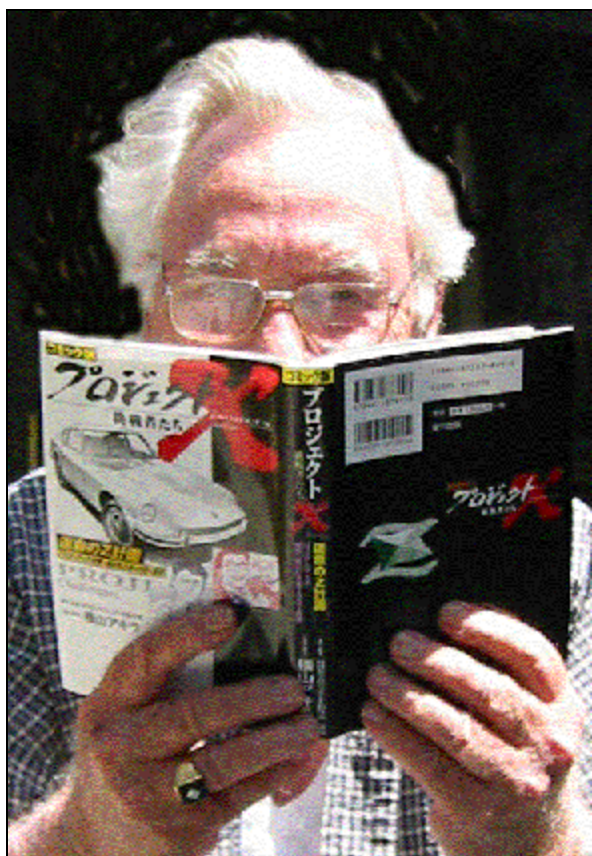
I had long wanted to visit Mr. K's office. He had visited me at the *Los Angeles Times* plant in Costa Mesa and again at my eclectic home workshop/office, where several Mr. K momentos grace the walls. At left, above my radial arm saw, hangs a yakko-style kite that he once flew. (*Yakko* refers to a medieval Japanese foot soldier.) Just below the kite is a framed photo of him and me with my old Datsun. At upper right is calligraphy depicting my Japanese name. Mr. K chose the three characters spelling out "Sellers" and meaning "In Search of a Better World." This office, built years ago over my double garage, serves my interest in computers, woodworking, books, music, television and just thinking about things. On two sides, it overlooks Yoshi's beautiful gardens. *Eureka! I have found it!*



In Tokyo a couple of years ago, when Nissan Executive Vice President Norio Matsumura, another friend, put his *hanko* seal on Mr. K's new contract, I was there, and Mr. K, grinning with pleasure, opened his new box of Nissan name cards and handed me the one off the top. I even mentioned this in my *Los Angeles Times* article. Writer/editor John O'Dell, who gave the piece its first editing, said: "Don't lose that name card." I didn't, but I began to worry about it. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of Mr. K's new name cards were out there, and they all looked exactly like mine. So this time I took my card with me to Tokyo, and asked Mr. K to certify it as the first. He wrote on both sides, as shown above. Now there is no question. Mine and no other is No. 1. Norio, by the way, has been in the automotive news recently. He was promoted to a position that will probably put him into the very top Nissan Motors spot within a year, as a replacement for CEO folk hero Carlos Ghosn. On this trip I didn't see Norio. We were ships passing in the night. As I was flying in, he was flying out. As I was flying out, he was flying in. By email I congratulated him on his heady advancement. In his reply he asked me to keep him informed about the dates of our next Tokyo trip, "so I can reserve a day for you and Yoshi." I like busy men who make time for their friends.



Mr. and Mrs. K pose with their four American guests in a photo taken by their son Mitsuo. From left to right are Stewart, Yoshi, Michelle and Jackson. At such luncheons, I pay more attention to conversation than food, so I can only report what Michelle said: "The thin-crust pizza was the best I ever ate." The four of us headed into the mountains the next day, where we would stay at Japanese-style inns in Kusatsu and Ikaho.



It might appear that I was having a bad hair day when Yoshi snapped this photo on the patio of our Lake Forest home. Actually I was having a bad Adobe Photoshop day as I inexpertly blotted out some distracting background images. But never mind. The point is to show the *manga* comic book that Mr. K gave me at our Tokyo luncheon. Writing on the inside cover leaf, he suggested that the volume could serve as a textbook in my Japanese language studies. Indeed it will. Two good friends — Mr. K himself and Masataka Usami of San Juan Capistrano — are major characters in this 1960s-'70s story about the marketing of Datsuns and Z cars. Masa, who is Shozo's older brother, was Mr. K's right-hand man during the time when Nissan USA grew from virtually nothing to an automotive powerhouse. He was often called "Mr. USA," getting the moniker from the initial letters of his Usami surname, *à la* Mr. K. Only a few years older than I am, Masa was almost as goodlooking in the 1960s, as can be seen in the *manga* panel below.



MASATAKA USAMI (at left)

An engineer, he often got his hands dirty when a Datsun wouldn't start in somebody's driveway. Later he became chief engineer of wildly successful Nissan USA.

YUTAKA KATAYAMA (at right)

Even before he became Mr. K and Nissan USA president, he argued passionately for more publicity and advertising, as the *manga* shows him doing in the late 1940s. Few listened then.

