

Mr. K & Friends

By Jackson Sellers

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Yutaka Katayama is an old friend. He is old in both senses of the word – in the length of our friendship and in the number of his years. Born in the same year as my father, he will be 102 in September. Call him Mr. K. Everybody else does. He is famous in automotive circles. In the 1960s and '70s, Mr. K built Nissan's Datsun brand into a global powerhouse. He is considered the father of the Datsun 510s and the Nissan Z-cars. The Automotive Hall of Fame in Dearborn, Michigan, recognizes him as such. My 510 wagon, still on the road after nearly 40 years, has carried me 350,000 miles thus far. Whenever Yoshi and I are in Tokyo, Mr. K always invites us to a roundtable luncheon at his spacious office in the upscale Jiyūgaoka shopping district. Just before the photo at upper right was snapped, Mr. K felt my hands on his shoulders as I got into position. He reached up, grasped them and pulled them down to his chest. I was touched by this display of affection. The gentleman sitting to the left is 85-year-old Masataka



Usami, also a good old friend. When Mr. K was president of Datsun U.S.A., Masa was his right-hand man, his chief engineer. A Japanese *manga*, a quality cartoon book, tells the story of the Datsun's rise from obscurity to prominence in America, concluding with the appearance of the spiffy Datsun 240-Z, the first of the Z sports cars.

That's Mr. K at bottom left, apparently at a moment of sweaty stress. That's Masa at bottom right, wearing gloves, since an engineer must do dirty work until the company grows and he becomes the engineering boss. There were 11 people at this luncheon, all Japanese except me, a common occurrence in Japan and often in America. I'm the



token *gaijin* everywhere. All the people here have dined at our home in Lake Forest, California, more than once in most cases. As always, Mr. K's lunch was delicious. Why not? The food comes into this top-floor office from a trendy Italian restaurant on the ground floor. Mr. K owns the building and is the restaurant's landlord. In fact, he owns a number of store-front buildings in the Jiyūgaoka neighborhood. I don't know how many. I've never quizzed him about it. None of my business. His son Mitsuo manages the properties. I sometimes tease Mitsuo, calling him "Kid," as in "Good job, Kid" when he arranges one of these luncheons. He is well into his 60s now, approaching retirement, and he is still working for his famous and long-living father. Well, Mitsuo retaliates, as he did this very day. Masa had passed around a *Yu-Yu-Jiteki of America* roster showing the Japanese ideographic signature seals of the



exclusive club's nine members. The guests were amused by some of the seals, including mine, which, according to the roster, meant "Sparrow Village," suggesting maybe the nom de plume of a poet. In the

photo above, I am pontificating on the Japanese written language, a subject certain to reveal my basic ignorance. Ken Asano, sitting next to me, grins. Gee, I was only saying that the ideographs meaning "woman" and "child," when combined, create the concept of "good." English, stuck with mute ABC's, can't raise such an image in the reader's mind. So then Mitsuo drags out a whiteboard and begins dissecting my "Sparrow Village" seal. Japanese love word games. Masa stands watching, and Eiichi Shimizu, Mr. K's longtime associate, is also engrossed. Tom Ishikawa, Mr. K's longtime travel advisor, wisely keeps eating. Anyway, Mitsuo proves that my proud seal could just as easily mean "Lonely Money-Loser." Ken and Harue Asano, sitting in the top photo between me and Masa's wife Fusako, live only about three miles from my California home. Like Masa, Ken is a *Yu-Yu-Jiteki* comrade. The Asanos were in Japan to fraternize with Yoshi and me in Tokyo, to



meet Mr. K at this luncheon, and to consider tearing down and rebuilding their aging Kawasaki home in the metropolitan Tokyo area. But Ken had still another reason to be there, one that was pertinent to what was nagging everybody in the wake of the awful March 11 quake and tsunami – how to bring the damaged Fukushima nuclear plant under full human control. Ken is a quite successful import-export guy, dealing mostly in electronic medical-related equipment. One client is a Boston manufacturer of a robot that can be remotely guided into hazardous places and can look around, sniff around, and report what it finds. The Fukushima nuclear plant needed a robot like that, so the Boston firm donated six of them, plus technicians to train operators. Ken arranged and coordinated the deal. One might think that technologically advanced Japan would make such robots. No. Its robotic engineers design robots that do cute things, like dance, sing and otherwise entertain. Okay, a personal and final note: At one



point I sneaked away for a cigarette on Mr. K's office patio. Masa caught me and snapped the photo above. Take a close look at my left

cheek. The squamous cell carcinoma surgery took place more than a year ago. Doctors said there would be no scar. Well, I can see it.



L to R seated: Masa Usami, Mr. K and his 98-year-old wife Masako, Masa's wife Fusako. L to R standing: Mit-suo Katayama, Tom Ishikawa, Jackson and Yoshi Sellers, Ken and Harue Asano. Photo credit: Eiichi Shimizu.