

〈翻 訳〉

Reminiscences of Yae Neesima :  
 “War Stories from Aizu Castle  
 by a Woman Who Dressed as a  
 Man” and “Mr. Neesima at Home”

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**Preface**

Born the daughter of a samurai, Yae (or Yaeko) Neesima (1845-1932) lived a remarkable life that bridged worlds. She fought in a castle siege during the Boshin War of 1868-69; received Christian baptism and staunchly supported her husband, the Christian educator Joseph Hardy Neesima (1843-1890)—whom she always called Jō; and lived out a life of strength and dignity in the decades following his death.

The reminiscences translated here show two aspects of her early life. The first selection, “War Stories from Aizu Castle by a Woman Who Dressed as a Man,” reveals her courage and strength in battle; the second, “Mr. Neesima at Home,” her wifely consideration and good humor. Besides learning about Yae, readers will also be treated to vivid insider accounts of conditions during that climactic siege, and perhaps see her husband in a new light as well.

Though told in the first person, these accounts were not written by Yae herself but are based on interviews conducted by a magazine writer. Yae was by then over sixty, and naturally enough suffered some slips of memory, mostly inconsequential; correcting them all is beyond the scope of this translation. Both accounts appeared in *Fujin*

*Sekai* [Women's World], a popular women's magazine published from 1906 to 1933. "War Stories" appeared in Vol. 4, No. 13, November 1909, pp. 46-51, and "Mr. Neesima" in Vol. 6, No. 1, January 1911, pp. 47-52.

All explanatory notes are our own. Names are given in Western order, except for pre-Meiji figures. Years are converted into the Gregorian calendar. "War Stories" was translated by Emiko Hibi, Toru Sugino and Yasuyo Edasawa. "Mr. Neesima at Home" was translated by Juliet W. Carpenter. She also edited the entire translation.

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## War Stories from Aizu Castle by a Woman Who Dressed as a Man

by Yaeko Neesima, widow of the late Mr. Neesima

### **As told to our reporter :**

Yaeko, widow of the late Joseph Hardy Neesima, the first chancellor of the Doshisha in Kyoto and a great figure to whom the educational world of our country is deeply indebted, has remained faithful to her late husband and prayed for the repose of his soul. She was decorated with the Sixth Order of Merit for her remarkable service as a Red Cross volunteer nurse in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars.<sup>1</sup>

Like Misaoko Yamakawa<sup>2</sup> and Mitoko Hasegawa,<sup>3</sup> Yaeko was born and raised the daughter of a samurai in Aizu Domain, and was actively involved in a major battle at the final stage of the Boshin War.<sup>4</sup> Fighting power in Aizu owed a great deal to the contribution of a number of such spirited women.

The following is Yaeko's description of her battle experiences in Aizu Castle. See also Yamakawa's and Hasegawa's stories in this year's issues No. 8 and No. 12.

1. In fact, Yae was decorated with the Seventh Order of Merit in 1896 after the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and with the Sixth Order of Merit in 1906 after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05).
2. Third daughter of Naoe Yamakawa, a chief retainer of Aizu Domain. At seventeen, she entered Aizu Castle to fight against the imperial troops in the Boshin War. Later she studied French in Russia. She presented herself at the Department of the Imperial Household and served as a lady-in-waiting to the Empress Dowager Shōken (1849-1914).
3. Wife of Katsutarō Hasegawa, magistrate of Aizu Wakamatsu City, who was killed in battle. She and her family reached the castle late and were denied entrance. During the siege, they suffered hardships outside the castle in town.
4. The Boshin War was fought in 1868-69 between forces of the ruling Tokugawa shogunate and forces seeking to return power to the emperor. Aizu Domain (today Fukushima Prefecture) remained loyal to the shogunate, and the castle was held under siege by imperial troops for one month in 1868 before finally surrendering.

### **My Resolution to Avenge My Brother's Death**

My father<sup>5</sup> was a grand master of artillery for Lord Aizu.<sup>6</sup> As is well known, on August 23, women and their families were called to enter the castle for a siege.<sup>7</sup> I put on a man's kimono and *hakama*,<sup>8</sup> slipped my feet into *zōri* sandals of twined hemp cloth, and carried two swords under my arm with a breech-loading seven-chambered repeating rifle on my shoulder. My background gave me a certain amount of knowledge about and skill at gunnery. That's why I took a rifle with me, although the other women carried *naginata*.<sup>9</sup>

My brother Saburō<sup>10</sup> had been killed in the battle of Toba in Yamashiro

that spring, and later his kimono and *hakama* arrived as mementos. I was determined to avenge his death. Feeling as if I were Saburō, I put on the clothes he left and entered the castle to fight as long as I might live, for my lord and for my brother.

5. Gompachi Yamamoto (1807-68).
6. Katamori Matsudaira (1835-93), the ninth and last lord of Aizu Domain.
7. Part of the Boshin War, the siege lasted from October 8 to November 6, 1868. The new anti-feudal party gathered force, dethroning the shogun and pursuing his defender, Lord Aizu, by laying siege to his castle headquarters. Records show that of 5,000 people in the castle, 636 were women and children. The new Meiji era was declared during the siege, on September 8 of the fourth year of Keio (October 23, 1868).
8. Loose pleated trousers.
9. A weapon consisting of a wooden shaft with a curved blade attached to one end. Used mainly by women of the samurai class.
10. Saburō Yamamoto (1849-68). In 1867, on the eve of the Restoration, he went to Kyoto to join the Aizu forces there. Early in January 1868, the battle of Toba broke out in Yamashiro, Kyoto, marking the beginning of the Boshin War. He was seriously wounded and sent to Edo, where he died.

### **Fresh Bloodstains on a White Kimono**

When I came to the covered bridge over the inner moat of the castle, I found a crowd swarming in. Before the gate, a warrior brandishing a drawn sword was crying out, "Women though you are, you shall not act in a cowardly way!" The atmosphere was bloodthirsty. One woman was wearing a white kimono<sup>11</sup> with fresh bloodstains on it. She probably came straight from killing someone in her family who was a coward and unwilling to fight in the castle.<sup>12</sup>

Some women carried small children piggyback, others led elderly persons

by the hand. There were all sorts of people there.

In the large drawing room inside the castle keep, a crowd of waiting women had closed around Princess Teruhime,<sup>13</sup> standing guard. Each of us had a dagger hidden in her bosom; we were prepared to kill ourselves, following our lord in death if need be.

11. A white kimono here signifies burial attire. The wearer came intending to die.
12. In fact, Yasuko Kawahara put two family members to death before entering the castle. Her mother-in-law Kikuko chose to die rather than be a burden to her, and plunged a dagger into her own throat. Yasuko assisted her suicide by beheading her, thus soaking her own pure white kimono with blood. She then killed her eight-year-old daughter Kuniko, who she feared would be raped if she fell into the hands of the enemy, before heading straight for the castle. (Yoshiaki Kusudo, *Yamamoto Yae: Ju to jūjika o ikita Aizu joshi* [Yamamoto Yae, a woman of Aizu who lived by the gun and the cross], Kawade Bunko, 2012, pp. 32-37.)
13. (1832-84). Adopted daughter of the eighth lord of Aizu.

### Pressing Scorching Hot Rice into Rice Balls

Women's role in the castle was threefold: to cook rations, to make bullets, and to nurse the wounded. What happened was just as Misaoko Yamakawa said in her *Fujin Sekai* interview in July. A great number of big pots were lined up, and whenever the rice<sup>14</sup> in one was cooked, we would make rice balls; but the just-cooked rice was so scorching hot that our palms would burn and blister. After every rice ball we made, we had to soak our hands in cold water, so it was hard to keep up. Not a grain of rice that went into the water was wasted, either. We used it to make porridge for the wounded. We women ate burned rice and rice that had fallen on the ground and was unsuitable for soldiers' rations. We never thought

at the time that there was anything the least dirty or unpleasant about it.

14. During the siege, only unmilled rice was available.

### **Her Most Anxious Moments**

While I was working in this way, my most anxious moments came, if I may mention such an indelicate topic, when I was in the toilet. As a warrior's daughter, if I died in vain without fighting back, I would disgrace my lord and my family. My only wish was that I might fight to the last and, even if felled by a random shot, die a glorious death. Therefore while I was in the toilet, I would think, "What if that cannon explodes, and I die like this? I'll disgrace myself in the worst possible way for a woman."

### **War Dead Lying "Asleep" in the Corridor**

Our way of making bullets was just as Misaoko Yamakawa described. We women put about one hundred bullets into each box and distributed them. The boxes were quite heavy. Under ordinary circumstances, a woman would not be able to lift even one. However, in our excitement we were able to shoulder and carry two or even three boxes to the armorers.<sup>15</sup> We did not just dress up in men's clothes, we worked like men. By and by, the number of the injured increased, but as we were under siege, many precious lives were lost because of the shortage of medicine. One evening as I walked along the corridor, I came upon a large number of soldiers lying there fast asleep. I thought how tired they must be and what a pity it all was. I lit my candle to see them better, afraid lest they should take cold, as their lives were so precious. Alas, those I had thought asleep were dead, laid out in the corridor because there was no room for them

anywhere else.

15. Elsewhere Yae gives two other telling descriptions of her physical strength: "My [blind and disabled] brother [Kakuma] weighed 82.5 kg and was quite heavy at that time. However, I was rather strong and carried him to and from the carriage on my back." "Niijima Yaeko toji kaikodan" ("Retrospection by Mrs. Yaeko Neesima." Reprinted by Naoto Yoshikai in *Doshisha Dansō*, No. 20, Doshisha Archives, March 2000, p. 105. "I was very strong and able to hoist a 60-kg rice bag onto my shoulder four times in a row at the age of 13." Benzō Hiraishi (ed.), *Aizu Boshin sensō* (The Aizu Boshin War), Maruhachi, 1928, p. 485.

### **Harakiri by a Seven-year-old and His Mother**

When I entered the castle I became an apprentice lady-in-waiting, and I was promoted to lady-in-waiting on the twenty-fifth.

I think it happened on the same day. Leaving the front entrance to go to the outer Taiko Gate, I saw a dozen or more boys with their own small suits of armor buckled on, probably aged twelve or thirteen, practicing drills on their own. As soon as they saw me, they came swarming around me and begged me to take them with me into battle. "Oh," I thought, "even these young boys are willing to lay down their lives for our lord!" My eyes filled with tears. "No," I told them, "I'm not going into battle now. I'll tell you when we go out to fight, so you just wait till then." They accepted this without protest and started their drills again.

A little while before the surrender, when the powder house exploded, a seven-year-old boy named Saburō, the third son of Kōhei Ōta, committed harakiri with his mother, thinking all was lost. They truly died glorious deaths. A woman who had brought her mother and daughter with her to the castle told someone, "At the last moment, I will facilitate the deaths of

my mother and daughter, but if for that reason I should fail to kill myself, please help me to die."

### **1,208 Firings in a Day**

The bombardment from the government force was blistering. At times a cannonball would explode in the great hall, breaking the roof, tearing up the floorboards, and making a hole in the ground. The floorboards, which had been nailed down with five-inch nails, would be scattered all around so no one could walk there. On September 12, someone in the Tsukimi Yagura [Moon-viewing Tower] kept track of the number of times the government force fired and counted 1,208 firings that day. I heard that he counted the number by jotting down a black dot every time there was a burst of cannon fire.

One night in the middle of a fierce battle, I was assigned to night watch with Miss Seyama, a senior lady-in-waiting, and we came across a warrior wounded in the arm. "Who goes there?" I said.

He answered, "While I was drinking with my comrades I got into a quarrel and was injured. Where is the nurses' station?"

Miss Seyama, woman though she was, showed herself worthy of her high position. "In these days of hardship, how dare you injure your body, which is dedicated to our lord, so easily?" She refused to tell him where the clinic was. Watching the scene unfold next to her, I was very impressed.

### **Autumn Moon by the Old Castle**

The castle surrendered on September 23. That night when I left from Sannomaru, the outer part of the castle, I composed this poem:

Tomorrow night  
someone from I know not where  
will gaze upon it here —  
this familiar sky drenched in moonlight.<sup>16</sup>

After that, as suggested by others, in order to commemorate my time in the castle I had a photo taken of myself dressed as a man. The swords, rifle and *zōri* sandals are all mementos of that time.

16. Several versions of the poem exist. Major differences are seen in the first phrase ("Tomorrow night" vs. "Tomorrow") and the second to last line ("familiar sky" vs. "familiar castle"). Nobuchiyo Iwazawa (2012, in *Ai Mirai*, pp. 220-229) argues that "familiar castle" (*mishiro*) was mistakenly transcribed as "familiar sky" (*misora*) because of the similarity in sounds. He concludes that the poem should read "Tomorrow night/someone from I know not where/will gaze upon it here — /this familiar castle drenched in moonlight."

## Mr. Neesima at Home

by Yaeko Neesima, widow of the late Mr. Neesima

Joseph Hardy Neesima is known by name to one and all as a pioneer in the Japanese religious world and as a great benefactor of Japanese education. His fiery faith and noble character, as well as the uncompromising courage with which he upheld his beliefs, never yielding an inch, made him a paragon of his time and a figure of wide veneration. Above all we ought to remember that he founded Japan's first private university. As his death twenty-one years ago recedes into the past, the Doshisha that he founded in Kyoto goes on making strong efforts for the education of talented youth. The student body now numbers several hundred. Many graduates are active in the

frontlines of society as politicians, educators, religious leaders, and literary figures. Although Neesima has left us, his spirit will surely live long in them.

Neesima was born in February 1843<sup>17</sup> and died in 1890.<sup>18</sup> His widow Yaeko is the younger sister of Kakuma Yamamoto, a great man of Aizu who served as advisor to the Kyoto prefectural government. She was foremost among women who fought in the siege of Aizu Castle. Neesima and she were married in Kyoto on January 3, 1876,<sup>19</sup> thirty-five years ago. She still lives in their Kyoto home, where memories often bring a tear to her eyes. What follows is a portion of the reminiscences she shared with this reporter when I called on her for an interview.

17. He was born February 12 in the Annaka domain residence in Kanda, Edo (modern-day Tokyo).

18. He died January 23 at Mukadeya Inn in Ohiso, Kanagawa, at the age of 46.

19. This was the first Christian wedding in Kyoto. The ceremony took place in the Jerome D. Davis house (now part of the Kyoto State Guest Hall in the Old Imperial Palace), where Yae had been baptized the day before.

### **Never Kept Her Waiting**

Jō came to Kyoto in 1875 and built this house<sup>20</sup> new in 1878. From the time he was a young man, he was physically weak and complained of not sleeping well, and he always got up very early in the morning. By six thirty he was done with breakfast, and before seven o'clock he'd be out the door. Doshisha was only eight *cho*<sup>21</sup> from our house, so he walked there every morning. He almost always came home for lunch and ate with me, but now and then he would eat in the school cafeteria with the students.

After lunch he would go back to school in the afternoon and be home around four. He studied in the evening, but he made it a rule to go to

sleep at ten. He liked to keep to a schedule. For lunch he always came home by twelve thirty, but on the rare occasions when he ate in the school cafeteria or had a guest for lunch, he would always send a messenger to tell me, "Today I'm going to eat here, so go ahead without me." I never once sat and waited for him in vain.

20. A two-story semi-Western, Colonial-style house with a central heating system and Western-style toilet, striking novelties at the time. It was built in 1878 with £200 donated by J.M. Sears, another adopted son of Alpheus Hardy. The house still stands at Teramachi-dori, Marutamachi agaru, Kamigyo-ku, and is open to the public. The furnished building was designated a tangible cultural property of Kyoto in 1985. Neesima first rented half a house on that site from court noble Yasuzane Takamatsu, and founded the Doshisha there on November 29, 1875.

21. About 875 meters, or roughly half a mile.

### **Secretly Ate 12 Bowls of Soba**

Jō's favorite food was soba noodles. Once he traveled to Nakasendō<sup>22</sup> with Sohō Tokutomi,<sup>23</sup> the head of *Kokumin Shimbun*,<sup>24</sup> as well as Tokio Yokoi<sup>25</sup> and Jirō Yuasa.<sup>26</sup> When they came to the town of Nezame in Shinshū, they all ate a lot of soba and promised each other never to tell. Later I heard that Jō ate twelve bowlfuls and Mr. Tokutomi eleven, and I was stunned.

There's another interesting story about soba. Around 1880 or 1881, Jō went to Tokyo and visited a friend who lived near what is now the crown prince's palace in Aoyama. On the way back, it was late at night and cold outside, and he stopped at a soba stall. He was sitting slurping his noodles with his coat collar turned up so no one would see him, when beside him a student who was also having a bowl of noodles addressed him: "Sensei

[Teacher.]” Jō was taken aback, and sat up straight. “Who are you?” he asked. The student said, “I heard you preach at Reinanzaka Church<sup>27</sup> the other day.” Jō was even more surprised, and took off leaving his noodles half eaten. Later he had a good laugh about it and said he had never felt so flustered in all his life.

22. An old highway connecting Edo (modern-day Tokyo) and Kyoto. Neesima and his companions left July 3, 1882 and arrived in Nezame four days later.
23. Sohō Tokutomi (1863-1957) was a prominent journalist and historian. He studied at Doshisha and was devoted to Neesima, working with him to support Doshisha and Japanese churches as his most trusted protégé. The inscription on Yae’s gravestone is in Tokutomi’s hand.
24. The newspaper *Kokumin Shimbun*, precursor of today’s *Tokyo Shimbun*, was published from 1890-1929. Tokutomi’s publishing company, the Min’yūsha, began by putting out *Kokumin no tomo* (The Nation’s Friend), 1887-98; this was Japan’s first magazine and the most influential of the nineteenth century.
25. Rev. Tokio Yokoi (1857-1927) was an influential Christian leader. He graduated from Doshisha and was ordained by Neesima in 1879. While serving as a Congregational pastor, he also worked as a journalist, a Christian magazine and newspaper editor, and a statesman. He was the third Doshisha chancellor (1897-99). He married Yae’s niece Mine.
26. Jirō Yuasa (1850-1932) was a statesman, a businessman, and an activist in the social welfare movement. Baptized by Neesima in 1878, he was one of the core members of Annaka Church, which Neesima established. After Neesima died, when Doshisha was in financial crisis, he moved to Kyoto and supported the school finances for 20 years without pay. His second wife was Sohō Tokutomi’s sister, and their son, Hachirō, served as the tenth and twelfth Doshisha chancellor (1935-41, 1947-50).
27. Founded in 1879 by Rev. Kōdo Kozaki, Neesima’s former student. After Neesima’s death, Kozaki became the second Doshisha chancellor (1890-1897). The church building dates from 1886.

## **Hated Alcohol, Loved Tobacco**

Usually he ate Western food and nothing else, but sometimes when he wasn't feeling well, if I said "Then let's send out for some soba," he would cheer right up. He really was extremely fond of soba.

Alcohol he never liked from the time he was a young man, and he never drank any. He liked to smoke, and did so quite a bit from the time he was a boy, but then he gave it up. Back in 1864, he broke the national seclusion law by getting on a ship in Hakodate<sup>28</sup> and sailing for America, and he worked as a sailor on the way. After a day's work, he would have a smoke, and the feeling, he said, was indescribable. But then he got to thinking, and the more he thought about it, the more it seemed like a terrible shame to waste fifteen or twenty minutes smoking. He decided that wasting precious time that way was the height of foolishness, and quit smoking altogether.

28. On July 17, at the age of 21, Neesima sneaked aboard the *Berlin*, commanded by Captain William T. Savory. Savory took him as far as Shanghai and arranged for him to travel the rest of the way to the United States on the *Wild Rover*, commanded by Captain Horace Taylor.

## **Broke His Pipe and Threw it in the Sea**

When the ship reached America,<sup>29</sup> the crew all went ashore, leaving Jō on board alone. After a while someone came back and said, "You come too," so he did. He felt in his pocket and found he had ten cents, so he bought himself some tobacco for five cents, and with the remaining five he bought a pipe. Then he went back to the ship and chopped the tobacco with his short sword, packed it in the big bowl of the pipe, and took two or three puffs. He said it tasted wonderful.

As he smoked he thought about how he ought to study now that he was in America — and then he remembered that just the other day he had given up smoking after deciding it interfered with his studies. It made him mad at himself to think he had started smoking again after once quitting. If he was going to break his own vows, he would never succeed. He was so upset that he took the pipe he'd just bought, snapped it in two, and threw it in the sea along with the tobacco. He never smoked again.

29. The *Wild Rover* reached Boston Harbor on July 20, 1865.

### **Happy to See His Dogs from the Second Floor**

When Jō went to school, over his shoulder he always carried a big bag like the mailman carries, stuffed full of books. When he came home he'd call out at the front door, "I'm home!" When I came out, often his bag would be lying in front of his study where he'd thrown it, while he was out back gardening in our little vegetable plot. He loved dogs, and always kept two or three. After he got sick, he would look down at the yard from his window on the second floor, and it made him happy to see his dogs running and playing there.

### **Ran Out of a Performance of Women's Joruri**

He had no interest in music or the theater. Once in Tokyo when he was just seventeen, as he was passing by Ryōgokubashi he saw a poster for women's joruri,<sup>30</sup> and out of curiosity he paid the sixteen mon or however much a ticket cost and went in. Soon a woman in a dark blue kimono with her face painted white came out on the stage and started to hum, but the humming made her throat swell, and he got into such a fit of the

giggles that he had to rush outside, clutching his two swords. Afterwards he had a good laugh about it.

The only other time he paid money to see a show was when he was in the United States and went to see a strongman from Japan.

Then again, he liked to leg wrestle or arm wrestle with his students, and often did. In the old days he had practiced martial arts quite a bit, so he was quite strong.

30. Stories sung to the accompaniment of a shamisen, a three-stringed instrument played with a plectrum.

### **Now, Now, Have a Cup of Tea**

He had a quick temper, and if he didn't like something, a blue vein would stand out at his temple. Then I'd say, "My, it looks like thunder today, there's a storm brewing!" That made him laugh.

Whenever anything upset him, he would tell me, so I used to say, "Instead of complaining, why not have a cup of tea?"

"How can you laugh when I'm so angry?" he would say. My answer was, "What good does it do if every time you're angry I get angry along with you?" Then he would say, "Mm, that's true," and in the end he'd laugh, too. That's how it always went.

### **Praising Countess Mutsu and Her Daughter**

Jō didn't talk about ladies very much, so what he thought about them I don't really know, but he always used to say that while it wasn't good to be indecisive like Japanese ladies, he didn't like American tomboys either, and that British ladies were what he liked the best. In America, when

company came the husband would give his seat to his wife, but in Britain it was the opposite, and he couldn't help liking British ladies more, he said.

Around then it was quite the vogue for ladies to make speeches, but Jō said that ladies had no business giving speeches, that they should acquit themselves like ladies at all times. He also said women of today needed to show a bit more courage.

Once when Count Munemitsu Mutsu<sup>31</sup> was minister of foreign affairs, Jō was invited to join the count and his family for dinner. When he came home he had nothing but praise for the countess<sup>32</sup> and her daughter. He said anyone with such fine social skills could go abroad without the least embarrassment.

Once a girls' school in Kumamoto asked him for some calligraphy, and he wrote, "Let virtue be your adornment."<sup>33</sup> I think that summed up his ideal.

31. Munemitsu Mutsu (1844-1897), a samurai by birth, was a Meiji statesman and diplomat. As minister of foreign affairs, he revised unequal treaties with fifteen countries including the United States, Britain, and Russia.
32. Ryōko Mutsu (1856-1900) was active in the Japanese Red Cross. During her husband's term as US ambassador (1888-1890), she was known as the "belle of Washington" for her beauty and intelligence.
33. Neesima wrote this in 1889 for Kumamoto Girls' School, whose headmaster was Rev. Danjō Ebina, his former student and a prominent theologian. Yae wrote the same words for Aizu Girls' School (now Fukushima Prefectural Aoi Senior High School) in 1928. The words are possibly a reworking of 1 Timothy 2: 9-10: "I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God."