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By Ichikawa Miako

[Beginning in the 1980s, Japan began repatriating thousands of Japanese who remained in China, many of them adopted by Chinese families, six decades ago when Japan was defeated and hundreds of thousands of farmer settlers were abandoned by fleeing Japanese soldiers. This is the story of one survivor. Japan Focus]

Harada Ikuko is haunted by the day she was marked for death. It was August 1945, and she was among a group of 200 Japanese in northeastern China fleeing the advancing Russian army.

The women, children and elderly Japanese found themselves in a vast field of buckwheat in Heilongjiang province. They were exhausted, having been on the run for five days.

At dawn, the leader of the Japanese group pulled out his gun and announced, "We'll never make it back to Japan."

He called for a mass suicide.

Harada was 12. Her father had gone off to fight in the war.

Children were lined up and sat in groups of 10. Gunshots rang out, each shot followed by a child toppling backward with a thud.

Harada braced herself for her turn. But ammunition had run out. The leader took out his sword.

The sword plunged into the girl's mother, skewering her baby brother who was held in her arms.

She averted her eyes when the sword came down, cutting into her neck.

That day, the girl lost her grandfather to the

Russian army; her mother, her brother and her sister were killed by fellow Japanese.

Her story does not end there.

A 32-year-old Chinese man found Harada, covered in blood and unconscious.

He nursed her back to health, and the two eventually married.

Sixty summers later, the woman, now a widow, lives in Japan.

She hopes to return one day to that buckwheat field to lay flowers at the place where the two first met.

"Some people say it's a fairy tale. Something that couldn't have happened during those times, when the world was all hatred and poverty. Why did he decide to take me home? I think it was because he had such a gentle heart," said Harada, 72, of her husband.

Harada now lives in Kita-Kyushu, in a public housing estate. She spends a lot of time thinking about her husband, He Haishan, who died in August 2004.

She still carries the 20-centimeter scar at the back of her neck.

Harada was nearly dead when He Haishan found her. He carried her for 40 minutes along a mountain trail to his home. His siblings and other villagers told him to get rid of her, to dump her body. They said if he helped a Japanese, he would be killed.

"But my husband just told them, 'I'll be killed then, so what?' He never budged," Harada said.

Harada was bedridden for two years. The man washed her neck wound morning and night with local spirits and salt water.

"He was the only one in the world I could trust," said Harada.

She made a full recovery, and when she turned 16, she was told she was free to go anywhere she liked, or if she wanted, to get married.

Harada recalls the tears that welled up in her eyes. Her vision blurred. She told the man standing in front of her, "No. I want to stay with you, all my life."

The Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976 made their life difficult. The man with a Japanese wife was shunned by his friends and colleagues. Their eight children were bullied by teachers, taunted by classmates. The children came home bruised and scratched.

Harada's husband told the children they didn't have to go to school, that it wasn't worth it.

He continued to work in his fields, never complaining.

In 1983, Harada returned to Japan with her youngest daughter under a program to repatriate war-displaced Japanese. Two years later, her husband followed with their other children.

"It's wonderful that we can all live together now," He said at the time.

However, once the children could speak Japanese and left home, he began to spend most of his time inside the house.

He would often reminisce about his home, the old buckwheat field, his siblings back in China. He died last year.

This year, on June 19, Harada's 40 descendants, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, brought over a huge cake to celebrate her 72nd birthday.

Her 15-year-old great-grandchild plays baseball. He went to the Fukuoka Tournament of the Senior High School Baseball Championship that opened July 9.

"They have all turned out quite well," Harada said.

Still, she has a recurring dream. She is working side by side with her husband out in the buckwheat fields.

When she awakens, she can't stop her tears from flowing.

With the status of a war-displaced Japanese, Harada will lose her welfare privileges if she leaves the country.

Nonetheless, Harada dreams of going to China this summer, to return to those fields in Heilongjiang.

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