

Kenshiro Abe

General Introduction

What follows is my translation of an article on Kenshiro Abe published in 1985 or thereabouts in a Japanese magazine. The un-named author appears to have been a Japanese writer/journalist and judoka who trained in one of the specialist high schools (Kosen) about the same time as Abe. As the opening sentence makes clear Abe Kenshiro spent some time in the UK and there are still a few who can remember him there. This translation is for them. Abe was obviously excellent at judo but of interest to judoka generally are some facts that emerge in this book concerning the rivalry between the Kodokan and the Butokukai (Busen) and how judo was in those days.

There are a number of bitter remarks about the Kodokan but these were voiced by the writer and are mostly in parenthesis “ “ . Where it says I (did this or that) the I refers to the writer. There are a number of remarks in brackets [] which are the translators clarifications.

“There are only a few in the Japanese judo world who remember the name Abe Kenshiro but perhaps there are still some in the UK who remember him from when he taught judo there. In Japan, by the 1950-60s, he was not one of those who had entered the ranks of past great judo men. Even when his name was occasionally mentioned by those who knew him, in most cases he was portrayed as an eccentric character.

In Japan there is a popular saying, “before Kimura Masahiko there was nobody; and after him there was nobody.” Kimura was at his peak around 1936 when he won a number of All Japan championships. The name Kimura became almost an adjective to describe someone of super-champion class. Those who knew Kimura did not think this was an exaggeration and many pamphlets and announcers described him in this manner. However it was said that there was only one man who could throw Kimura ‘all over the place’ and that was Kenshiro Abe.

The twelve years or so from the beginning of the Showa period (1926) to about 1940 was perhaps the peak of Japanese judo. This was when judo or kendo were compulsory subjects in middle school and judo thrived in ordinary high schools, specialist high schools, universities, in the armed forces and in machi (street) dojos. Technique and spirit reached the heights of development. One could say that present day judo is a pale shadow of the judo of that time.

Abe’s Primary and Middle School Judo Start

So what are the facts about this elusive character? The public record of him states that he was the fourth son of Abe Toshizo (Rizo perhaps) of Tokushima prefecture, Myozai county (-gun) on the island of Shikoku, His village was situated among rice fields about 1.9km south from the Yoshinokawa river. Mountains were near and the area later became a national old folks retirement area. Nearby there are still three houses carrying the family name of Abe. The family occupied a plot of just under 2 acres. The father and head of the house Toshizo was headmaster of the local primary school. He married a local girl and between them they had four sons and five daughters. The five girls were born first.

The oldest son of the Abe household Kiyoshi trained as a secondary school teacher and taught at the local primary school. However when his father died he re-trained as a dentist in Osaka where he eventually worked and lived. Kenshiro obviously came from an educated family.

At school Kenshiro did not exactly dislike studying but his most favourite time was when they did sumo. His physique was not anything special but he was the best at sumo in his school and in the area. A fateful move for Kenshiro's was when he entered middle school (now the Kawashima High school) in 1927. Judo was not practiced at his middle school so he first joined the basketball group there. Then in his second year an ex- police 3rd Dan by the name of Nakamoto set up a judo section in the school which Kenshiro gladly joined. Apart from sumo, judo and basketball there is no record of him doing any other martial arts although during his time in the Japanese army for which see below he would certainly have trained at jukendo (bayonet fighting).

Nakamoto was a fine teacher and Kenshiro was inspired by him. Between the two of them their energies combined. In the spring of his third middle school year Kenshiro was graded 1st Kyu and then in the autumn of the same year he won his 1st Dan. In his 4th year he got his 2nd Dan and in his fifth year he graded 3rd Dan aged nineteen.

In 1925 there was probably no other instance in the whole country of a 19 year old middle school student being graded 3rd Dan. In his promotion exam Kenshiro beat all the other ten examinees. The man who came to grade them was Butokukai HQ 8th Dan (and Hanshi) Tabata Shotaro (later Kodokan 10th Dan). After the grading Tabata strongly urged Kenshiro to join the Butokukai Specialist Martial Arts school (Busen for short) in Kyoto.

Abe Enters The Butokukai Specialist Martial Arts School(Busen)

During this period Abe formed the technical basis of his judo which was ashi-barai, harai-tsurikomiashi, uchimata, hane-goshi and left and right tai-otoshi. Up to this point Tokushima prefecture was not noted for the production of top class judoka but from his fourth year at middle school nobody in the prefecture could stand up to him or his school team.

As his graduation from middle school approached his judo coach Nakamoto and all around urged him to apply to the Butokukai Specialist Martial Arts College in Kyoto (Busen). Tabata as mentioned above also talked to him about it. As it happened one middle school student of his school who was a year ahead of him by the name of Aoyama had already entered Busen which created a useful connection.

There were other specialist martial arts colleges in the east of Japan such as the Tokyo Koshiko (probably Kano's Kotoshihan Gakko is meant here), the Tokyo Koshi Taiiku-ka (Tokyo Special Physical Education Course and the Kokushikan¹College all for middle school graduates who wanted to become college judo/kendo teachers or police instructors. However it was the Butokukai Specialist College that attracted the best.

Each year the Kokushikan signed up twenty judo and twenty kendo students although as many as 150 students applied to enter either course. Abe applied to the Kokushikan which had an earlier entrance exam than the rest. This was on the advice of some other Tokushima prefecture students who had previously taken the entrance exam. The judo/kendo course had an entry competition. Abe qualified for this by easily beating three other would be entrants. Attending this competition was Kudo Kazumi of the Tokyo Koshi college and the Kodokan. After the judo matches Kudo called Abe over and said, 'I take it that you will enter the Kokushikan if you are accepted!' Kudo it seems was anxious to sign him up. But Abe replied, 'I will talk it over with my parents.' Normally a student could have given the ambiguous reply Haa (yes....) but nineteen year old Abe went on without hesitation, 'After this exam I will try for Busen and if they accept me that is where I will enter.' Kudo's expression hardened and he said nothing.

Soon after, in the Busen entrance competition, Abe won two matches and drew the third. Which made him second after one Azuma who had quit the Kokushikan after one year.

Having been accepted for Busen the next problem to face was how Abe was to live in Kyoto. There were several schools (juku) which also provided accommodation for the students including the Isogai-juku but there was no juku which catered for students from Shikoku but Abe was not deterred. (Coach Nakamoto said of Abe that he was indifferent to his personal appearance and that he was like an oak branch which once bent never returns to its original position). Abe then begged his 56 year old mother to accompany him to Kyoto. She answered, 'This will be my last duty to my child. I will serve you with our family's special fried dragon-flies and I will go to Kyoto. She then sold off half the land, rented out part of the remainder for cultivation and found a house to rent near Shika-ga-tani in Kyoto. Just before this Abe's older sister gave up her job as dental assistant to her older brother in Osaka and came to live with them in Kyoto.

Busen was housed in a two storey reinforced concrete building behind the wooden Butokuden (Military Virtues Palace) in the Heian Shrine precinct. The judo section had its own 250 mat dojo for sole use but occasionally it used the 400 mat great dojo in the Butokuden.

At the usual welcome party for new students Abe was perplexed. All were expected to drink a lot of alcohol but Abe refused saying that he did not drink. Eventually all were asked to sing a song. Those students who knew Abe well knew that he was so concentrated on his judo that he was hardly able to do anything else. Eventually Abe's turn came around. He announced that since he couldn't do anything he would recite one poem (a short waka) from the recollections of Kumazawa Banzan, a reforming samurai of the 17th century. With a fairly resonant voice he recited it and the noise around him soon died down.

"Though my anxieties now pile up - I will test myself to the very limits of my body"

The second part of the poem faithfully reflects the life of Abe at the Busen and indeed for the rest of his life thereafter.

At Busen the daily programme was literature in the morning, namely Japanese, classical Chinese, physiology and hygiene. From 1.30-3pm there was technical training led by the Busen teachers and from 3-4.30pm there was free practice. At the coldest and hottest times of the year there were special hot and cold training periods (kangeiko and doyoageiko) from 6am – 7.30am.

The judo teachers included Isogai, Tabata and Kurihara. Isogai was quite old and did not do randori with the students but the other teachers did especially Kurihara who was known as Devil Kurihara. All three later became Kodokan 10th Dans. Three years previously in 1929 Kurihara won the first of the prestigious Tenran Shiai (held in front of the Emperor) beating Ushijima in the final.

When Abe practised with Kurihara he always lost no matter how hard he tried. Kurihara handled him easily In particular he would catch and pull one of Abe's arms and quickly get a joint-lock on it and Abe had no means to stop it [this was probably a standing armlock].

It goes without saying that at Busen the first year students were roughly tossed about (bullied/hazed) by all the other students. Abe trained often with Hirata the captain of the first year. At first Abe got thrown around by him but soon caught him up. In the autumn of his first year at Busen (1932) Abe graded to 4th Dan.

The following year Abe's sister Toyoko got interested in the Naginata [halberd] and joined the Busen classes in that martial art under sensei Nishigaki. Often when she had finished her training she would come and watch her brother train. Eventually she wrote a book on the naginata and taught it twice a week. Toyoko heard of a five room house up for rental from a Kyoto University medical professor. It was near the Heian Shrine and the Butokuden so she, her brother and mother moved into the house. There were two other empty rooms which she rented out to Busen students probably from the island of Shikoku..

The judo free-fighting session at the Butokuden consisted of ten to fifteen randori without a rest. Kenshiro nearly always did the most however. He always carried on throwing and being thrown to the point where he staggered around from exhaustion ending up face down on the mat barely able to rise. There were others like that. Whereupon the teaching assistants and the senior students would shout out, 'You haven't done enough, Get up!' and kick them up on to their feet. The dojo often presented a harrowing sight.

Immediately after the Manchurian Incident (1931) when Japan annexed Manchuria there was little employment to be had in Japan. Getting a job based on PE qualifications (which is what the Busen students were hoping for) required the degree of severity as described above or so the teachers seemed to believe.

Every Saturday afternoon training competitions were held in the Busen. Toyoko often went to watch. According to her she never saw her brother beaten in these training competitions. The stronger judoka were often given five man line ups with each bout lasting five minutes. When he took on his five man line-up he fought two second dans, two third dans and one fourth dan. It only took him about two minutes to finish them off. When he did that Isogai would cry out, 'Have you finished already!' and

give him another line-up. There were even times when Isogai or Tabata would give him a third five-man line-up. In the autumn of his second year in Busen, Abe was promoted to 5th Dan.

The teaching staff at Busen were not in the habit of praising students including Abe. Their expression of feelings towards their students were only expressed in the amount of training they made them do.

On Saturday evenings most Busen students would go out for a drink. A number of them would visit the licensed quarters of Kyoto looking for women. Kenshiro Abe however never drank or smoked and didn't like the company of his contemporaries that much. He never thought to buy sex, make money or expose his inner self.

When he returned home after training he would read what his seniors described as difficult books such as philosophy. In his third or fourth year he read all of Tanabe Hajime's Outline of Philosophy in the Iwanami series. He also crept secretly into lectures given by Tanabe Hajime at the Kyoto Imperial University. In later years Abe smiled wryly and said, 'I don't think I understood them that much.' Certainly no one else from Busen did.

One thing that Abe often did on returning home was to visit a nursery playground next to Nanzenji temple (when it wasn't raining) – accompanied by his sister. The playground was lit by a few small lanterns but in winter mostly it was quite dark.

Clad in shorts Abe would rope-skip in periods from five minutes up to twenty minutes with Toyoko calling out the times upon which he would briefly rest then carry on. Mixed in was other types of skipping such as double skips and rear skipping. Abe later explained that this type of training made his footwork faster and that footwork was important in sport and especially in judo. Abe also recommended this to his contemporaries and junior students. I have never heard of any judo man recommending rope-skipping on a daily basis as a form of training for judo. He may have got the idea from boxing training. Abe's okuri-ashi-harai, tsubame-gaeshi and his harai-tsurikomi-ashi which he did from a very upright posture were unlike any others in Japan for speed and sharpness.

On moonlit nights he ventured out to the nursery play ground and went at his training even harder. His skipping made him run with sweat even in the winter. At other times he went to the part of the playground that had swings with sand underneath and practised somersaults with or without assistance.

When it was too wet he laid cushions on his veranda and practised upstarts (flicking back on to ones feet from a back-lying position). In addition he worked out with chest expanders. Around this time he fought a number of top class judoka and in one instance he successfully used centripetal force (kyushindo) to throw a much heavier opponent. Perhaps this was the start of his judo philosophy of kyushindo.

Abe was lucky in one respect and that was the care he received from his sister Toyoko who cooked for him (she was a good cook), who looked after any injuries incurred in training and washed his judogi. When the judogi was washed and dried she folded it and put it in the Tokonoma recess in the room and when questioned about this would

say for a judoman the judogi is like a samurai's armour and it is appropriate to place the gi there. He was also the object of physiological research (The Biology of Fatigue) by Prof. Sasakawa, a Kyoto University medical professor. This lasted a few years.

During the summer holidays the majority of Busen students returned to their home towns. During this holiday it was usual for the All-Japan Specialist High Schools (Kosen) to hold their championships in the Butoku-den to which Abe went to watch and where he learned a lot about Kosen-judo. Since the Kosen competitors could do as much groundwork as they liked and usually chose nothing but groundwork, it was not necessary to have the wide fifty mat contest area as with Kodokan judo. The contest format was to have fifteen competitors in each team (winner stays on) and it was not unusual to see a competitor fight for thirty or forty minutes. This was similar to medieval jujitsu groundwork.

From the start Busen judo was much the same as Kodokan judo - both aimed at a tachi-waza and ne-waza mix to a ratio of 80%-20%. The Kyoto based No 3 Specialist High School often held Kosen style matches with Busen and they were well matched. At the time there was no recorded instance of the Tokyo Keishicho (police) with its direct connection with the Kodokan or Tokyo based Waseda University at its zenith beating a first class Kosen high school [This probably meant under Kosen judo rules].

From quite early on (1932) Abe became the captain (Taisho) of the 22 new Busen first year students. Among them were many strong students. Abe often participated in the group practice (godokeiko) between Busen, Kyoto 3rd High School, and the Doshisha University attached commercial high school. Doshisha won the national upper middle school championships sponsored by the Mainichi newspaper and Kyoto University and eventually in 1937 it won the national high-school championships.

Abe often said that we (Busen?) were not a problem for them. It was rare for a judoman to say that. I once asked Hosotani (a later Busen teacher) if Abe was not so strong on the ground but Hosotani replied No, he was very strong at groundwork and supple. (Hosotani was later groundwork advisor to the Japanese 1964 Olympic team). When Hosotani's team won the 1934 All Japan middle school championships it met the Chinzai middle school captained by Kimura Masahiko and beat them. Kimura was already an exceptional 4th Dan Middle school student. When the Kodokan specialists heard about him they travelled to Kumamoto to observe and train with him but they were mercilessly dealt with. Kimura did eventually end up fighting for the Tokyo based Takushoku University. These middle school championships consisted of teams of six and were fought under Kosen rules in which groundwork was at the centre.

As we have seen above Abe was a bit of a philosopher. During his 3rd year at Busen he wrote a critique of Takagi Naoyuki's Scientific Study of Judo (Biological Studies No. 6(2)). This is still worth reading. In it Takagi writes that those who mainly do standing judo praise throwing principles to the skies and those who do mainly groundwork similarly praise its principles. But the scope of judo he wrote is very wide and contains special principles and urges judoka to practise both standing and groundwork. Abe presumably agreed with this since he was mainly a tachi-waza man. It seems that both Kimura and Abe were both very competent on the ground and in standing and that they could win whatever the rules.

Around this time Kodokan judo (east Japan) was characterized as being throwing judo and Kansai (west Japan) judo as being groundwork judo (Kosen). The Kodokan changed the rules in 1925 in order to restrict the growth of groundwork-only contest. This was done by the Kodokan to stop Kosen judo winning. Kosen judo lost its power following the war defeat but before the war it was very influential and opposed Kodokan judo. [see my A History of Judo for a different interpretation]

There is no record of Kimura reading Abe's critique or being influenced by it but without doubt it was Kimura who perfected judo with his equal emphasis on both types of judo at a critical time following the 1925 Kodokan contest rule changes which limited groundwork opportunities.

Becomes Busen Instructor

In 1936 Abe graduated from Busen but stayed on as an assistant instructor. Other strong Busen graduates such as Ogawa and Ito Tokuhara also stayed on. Ito was much taller and heavier than Abe who studied how to beat him. He was a perfect object of research for Abe. Ito was a tad slower than Abe who could read what he was about to do and what his next move would be. Ito respected Abe and often asked for his advice on technique.

In 1937 Matsumoto Yasuichi graduated from the Fukuoka Myozen Middle School and entered Busen. He was 187cm tall and weighed 79kg. Later he went on to win the All Japan Championships in 1948 and at the age of 38 participated in a lot of competitions up to the 1st World Championships of 1956 where he just failed to represent Japan in the selection contests (he lost to Yoshimatsu in the semi-final). He was a fierce fighter and memorable were Matsumoto's matches against Kimura whom he fought four times.

Perhaps his most legendary match against Kimura was in Fukuoka in 1948 in the final of the Shinsei Judo Taikai. The match was extended seven times and lasted about fifty minutes. Toward the end of the match Matsumoto's arm was broken by Kimura's Ude-garami and both men fell off the raised contest area. Matsumoto climbed back up with his arm hanging uselessly at his side and advanced again on Kimura crying out loudly *Sa koi!* (come on then!). Confusion reigned among the judges but the referee stopped the match and gave the match to Kimura – Itami-wake!

When Matsumoto first entered Busen he weighed 79kg and Abe only came up to his shoulder. When they first fought Abe unleashed a barrage of attacks and handled him easily. The highest ranked captain of Busen was Hirose who weighed 92kg at a height of 164cm. In the 1950s Hirose often fought in the All Japan Championships but Abe handled him as easily as he did with Matsumoto who thought that Abe had something magical in his body. He could beat them all. Matsumoto, Hosotani, contemporaries, seniors and juniors all regarded Abe as very special. Not only did he play with them in training but he taught them all the techniques and principles of judo.

According to Abe all the rigid bones in the body are linked by joints which means that the bones can only move in complicated circles. To throw someone the thrower has to consider how to use this circular movement effectively. When teaching Abe would often call out somebody as a partner and analyse ways in which this could be done.

This was based not only on his training experience but on his understanding of the principles involved particularly Kyushindo (centripetal force) and Banbutsu ruten (all things are set in motion and flow). Matsumoto and others wondered if Abe's methods were not based on the application of physics and dynamics to judo. Abe apparently wrote an article for the Busen Alumni magazine entitled *Oсотogari Ron : An Essay on Oсотogari*.

If any of his Busen students lost in an unsightly way Abe would get angry and complain. He was always concerned that his students should grow. His fine detailed instruction was part of this.

Abe's Three Major Contest Results

Abe's best major competitions results occurred during the period 1934-36. The first in 1934 was the Internal-External Red & White Team Championships (Naigai-chi Taiko Judo Kohaku Shiai Taikai). This event was under the auspices of the Colonization Ministry and consisted of mainland Japan (naichi) against external Japan (gaichi) including Korea and Manchuria etc. Abe 5th Dan participated in this for the internal team and there is a record of him beating a Kimura Minoru 4th Dan and one other 4th Dan called Kadowaki of the Dairen Police [in China] but Kimura is a common surname in Japan and the rest of the name is not the same as that of the great Kimura mentioned above. Abe is also a common Japanese surname and a number of Abes can be found in the contest records. The internal group won this particular event.

However I was still determined to chase up the story of how Abe easily beat the great Kimura and interviewed a number of times those who had close connection with the Kimura such as Yamaguchi and Ushijima who was Kimura's teacher. The second competition in 1935 seems to have been a very special one and was between five of the top 5th Dans in Japan. I checked what records were available about this time and discovered one small reference in a *Asahi Newspaper* of 1936 to a winner-stays-on match held the year before, in May 1935, between five top fifth Dans in the Saineikan dojo within the Imperial Palace grounds. A clue to possible imperial presence was the fact that after the individual bouts Ushijima then took on all the 5th Dans in a line-up. It seems to have been quite a formal set-up. The five top 5th Dans were Kimura of Takudai, Osawa Yoshimi of the police (?), Murata from Hokkaido, Sato of the Palace police and Abe of Busen.

I also interviewed those who had actually witnessed the competition. According to one account when Abe closed with Kimura it was done fairly gently (this reinforces the view that a member of the Imperial family was present and that they may have been expected to put on a good show). Abe scored a waza ari in the opening seconds of the match with harai-tsurikomi-ashi. Then as Kimura rose to his feet Abe swept him down again on to his head with ashi-barai. Abe then went on to win all his remaining bouts very quickly. At that time Abe was arguably the strongest judoman in Japan. This was the culminating point of his judo career.

The third competition was when he beat three 5th Dans in a row. It took place on 30th April 1936 on the occasion of the first Zen-Nippon Tozai Taiko Shiai (All-Japan East versus West Team Championships). This was held in Fukuoka in Kyushu. (Kimura did not participate in this competition)

The match was fought with the best thirty two men from each region in a winner stays on basis. The first man out the senpo (spearhead) would be good for obvious reasons but from him to the last and strongest man who would be the captain (Taisho) the teams would be arranged in roughly ascending grade order. Abe came out to fight early on for the West team (9th from the Senpo).

Judo thrived in the East (meaning the Tokyo area and further north) and it thrived in the West namely Kyoto, Kyushu, Shikoku, Osaka and Kobe so it was understandable that the first East-West Tournament (Tozai Taiko Taikai) should be held in Fukuoka. The land mass of the west of Japan was quite a bit smaller than the eastern section so Manchuria, Korea (at the time part of the Japanese empire).and Taiwan were included in the Western camp as well.

Qualification for either team depended on place of residence and 32 of the best competitors were selected to represent each team. The Fukuoka Daily Newspaper carried quite a lot of eye catching stories on its front page about the competition from just over a month before the match.

The captain of the East team was a 39 year old 7th Dan by the name of Sato Kinnohiko. The captain of the West Team was a 46 year old 7th Dan Udo Torao. Both captains and vice-captains were previous winners of the All Japan Championships [the early championships were fought in several categories] or Tenran Shiai. Although they were veterans all were still training hard around 1947 which I actually observed.

These champions knew each other's judo well so it seemed that the match would probably be decided by two or three of the younger 6th Dans or by some of the larger group of 5th Dans which numbered about 24 judoka.

The core of the East team consisted of graduates of the Tokyo Koto Shihan Gakko, the Kodokan, the private universities and some still studying at university. The Western team centred on graduates of the Butokukai Senmon Gakko or Busen for short. This was the specialist martial arts college of the Butokukai based in Kyoto, There were also some students still studying and judo people from Kyushu. It was basically a Kodokan versus Butokukai match.

The Tokyo Koto Shihan Gakko (Tokyo Teachers Training College) was headed by Kano Jigoro for many years and obviously had direct links to the Kodokan. Busen was part of the Butokukai Foundation which was staffed by Isogai and Nagaoka who were students sent there by Kano in the beginning. Eventually Busen influence matured and came to rival the Koto Shihan Gakko and/or the Kodokan.

The two teams were well balanced and the matches were fought for only one Ippon and not for Yuseigachi (superiority) wins. It was not easy to make even one win so winning one bout then staying on to take on the next person and getting a draw was considered outstanding.

In the lead up to the match the local newspaper did several profiles of the contestants. Kenshiro Abe is mentioned here and there among them. His reputation was stronger

in the Kyoto area than anywhere else. A photo of Abe shows him as a round-faced, close-cropped youth with a serious expression.

The average height of the West Team competitors was 168cm and the average weight was 79k. Compare this to the average height and weight of the All Japan entrants in 1986 which was 180cm and 106k.

The tickets for the championships quickly sold out. The match was reported on all over Kyushu and in the cities of Kyushu people gathered around the notice boards where the results were written up.

On the day of the championships the officials including Jigoro Kano and the competitors gathered in lines to listen to the various speeches of welcome and to exchange greetings. When their names were being read out one competitor – Abe Kenshiro - ran forward from his line, bowed and then ran back [it was not clear what he did exactly]. The other players watched this wondering what he was up to. Etiquette in those days was strictly observed. Some fifty years after the event (in 1977) I still remember the strong impression I received from this incident. This was perhaps an early indication of his eccentricity.

At 1200hrs the event began. The referees were headed by Mifune Kyuzo who was then 8th Dan and a Kodokan man. The matches were twenty minutes for the captains, 15 minutes for the vice-captains and 8 minutes for the rest. The first match was won by the East 5th Dan Senpo (spearhead) with Ushiro-goshi. Two drawn matches followed then Ajioka of the East team won with Osotogari. Then the next four matches were drawn after which Abe Kenshiro came on to the mat. At this point the East team was leading by two matches. Abe then disposed of three fifth dans in a row and lost his fourth match on the ground. Abe's first win was with Osoto-makikomi, then Osoto-gaeshi and then Osoto-makikomi again. The tournament continued with a lot of drawn matches (23 in total!) and a sprinkling of wins on either side but eventually the West team won 7 matches to 6 and it was Kenshiro Abe and his three wins which had decided the match. In one of those matches both contestants fell off the one metre high contest area injuring Abe's left leg but this did not stop him.

There was one more All-Japan Competition which Abe participated in when he was 37 years old (one wonders what was he thinking of?) in 1950. His dislocated shoulder left his right arm virtually useless and his loss of muscle could be plainly seen. He had also become a heavy smoker in the army but he could not be dissuaded from competing. His shaven head shone as he climbed up on to the mat. In his first match he met Mori of Yamaguchi prefecture who he beat with Yokoshihogatame – a rare groundwork win for him. In round two he came up against the famous Ishikawa who he beat with Abise-taoshi [the record here must be wrong because Ishikawa won this competition defeating Hirose in the final].

The Great Kimura

At the time I was a third year student at the Fukui Commercial High School and also doing judo there. "I was a great fan of Kimura but at the same time had great respect for Abe. Some 17 years later I talked with Yamaguchi who at 100kg was in the top rank of Japanese judo and we got on to the subject of Abe. (Yamaguchi and Kimura

both turned pro-wrestlers at the same time). Yamaguchi once fought a draw with Kimura in a match between Tokyo Federation students versus the Manchurian army team. I asked Yamaguchi who was the strongest judo-man of that time? He replied, 'Abe, he was fantastic.' He went on to relate that there was a practice session for all, the day before the first East-West tournament above but Abe handled them all. If he had not injured himself in the actual tournament he might have beaten five or six in a row.

In 1935 Kimura finished his studies at the Chinzai middle school and entered Takushoku University's [Takudai for short] preparatory course in Tokyo where Ushijima was the chief sensei and Shihan. Kimura lodged in Ushijima's dormitory and trained 7-8 hours per day [Kimura was famous for the amount of work he did]. In that same year Kimura won the All-Japan University Kosen Students championships and in the following year he was captain of the Takudai team which won the national Kosen championships. This was the Kanto (East) area's one and only medal. Kimura put a lot of effort into groundwork, among other things. Eventually he developed an ude-garami that all his opponent went in fear of. There were a number of recorded instances of Kimura actually breaking arms. [I once met an ude-garami expert in the Kodokan who showed me a lot of ude-garami variations and entries].

Into the Japanese Army

In June of 1937 Abe enlisted for active service with the Tokushima 43rd Infantry Regiment. This was partly to do with the fact that Abe had finished his studies at Busen and that his exemption from military service had run out. In July 1937 the so called Lukou Bridge Incident occurred on the outskirts of Beijing between Japanese and Chinese troops. This minor incident was used by the Japanese to rush reinforcements to Hopei province and this led to war between China and Japan. Patriotic duty required young Japanese men to enlist rather than wait to be called up.

Abe had a number of judo injuries including a dislocated shoulder which an over excited student inflicted on him when he was bowing. It continued to cause him trouble for many years after. If during his enlistment examination he had mentioned this he might have been rejected for service or exempted for longer but Abe saw his duty clearly.

Abe was soon sent to a wilderness in Manchuria (Manchukuo) in north-east China which was controlled by the Japanese Kwantung army [this was an infantry group based in Port Arthur (Ryojun in Japanese) with an HQ in Hsinking. The army's role was to guard and control the strategic area East of the Pass. This army had a ferocious reputation but towards the end of the war it was severely mauled by soviet mechanized forces. The army became very independent of Tokyo control and dictated the course of the war in China. It was also known as a hotbed of the Kodo-ha (Imperial faction)

Abe was stationed there for four very turbulent years 1937-41. Almost nothing is known about his time in Manchuria and one cannot help wondering how seriously this affected his later life and decisions. It seems he never wore a judo suit during the whole time he was there as a probationary officer neither did he do anything in the army that was connected with judo. [It seems that Kodokan judo made little inroad

into the Japanese army which is curious when you think how strong judo was in the navy].

Demobilization

During his ten years of judo Abe had rarely taken more than three days off from training and as a consequence he had built up a typical judo physique which inevitably declined during his time in the army. In 1941 he was promoted to second lieutenant and at the same time he was discharged from military service and returned to Japan. He was then twenty eight years old and had lost a lot of hair.

On arriving back in Japan he first went to his mother and older sister's place in east Teno-cho in Kyoto where his mother who was 65 began preparing his welcome back, cooking the traditional rice and red beans. He spoke briefly to them then picked up his gi and headed for the Busen. In the assistants' room he greeted everybody, changed into his kit and went to the dojo where he began practising breakfalls for the first time in four years. Isogai who had not seen him arrive, heard him in the dojo and came running out and hugged him. His eyes moistened as he said, "Ah Abe, you've returned. That's good." Isogai who had never showed any emotion with regard to Abe showed it for the first time.

Like a fish released into water Abe began training again. Remaining in the dojo were Matsumoto and Hosotani who had entered Busen after their military service. Ten days later Matsumoto practised with Abe. "You are still strong but compared with when I first joined Busen you have lost a bit of speed," he said. Hosotani also had a go with Abe on the ground and simply commented that Abe was breathing hard. Abe gradually increased the amount of training so that after two months he could take on three people in a row without losing his breath. His judo sense also returned to him.

Soon after that he got married. His wife was seven years younger than him and between them they had three daughters. Unfortunately the Greater East Asian War broke out and for a second time it looked like he would be stopped from doing judo.

Back in the Army Again

His former Lt. Col in the Kwantong army hearing that he had returned from Manchuria called him from Kyoto and re-enlisted him in the army. "Your discharge was a nonsense," he said, "You should be the captain." Abe became attached to the Tokushima Regiment again. Perhaps part of the reason for this was that he was a frequent Go playing partner of his colonel in Manchuria. Abe began regularly commuting from Kyoto to the Regiment's base in Tokushima. It should be born in mind that the professional soldiers of the time, regardless of their intelligence could virtually abuse anyone they wished [Life in the Japanese army was pretty brutal, beatings were commonplace]. Isogai was deeply disappointed with this turn of events. Someone who knew him in his time as a soldier said that Abe never talked about his judo successes. Abe used to cycle from his Kyoto home to the Regiment's office. The war situation got worse for Japan and the Tokushima Reserve Regiment was converted to an Assault Regiment and Abe was promoted to Daitaicho or Battalion Commander. This was a conscripted regiment staffed by Koreans who did not speak a word of Japanese. [As already noted almost nothing is known about Abe's four years in Kuantong 1937-41. Similarly little is known about military record during

the Pacific war 1941-45. Did he remain in Tokushima training new conscripts or did he go into active service in the Pacific or did he return to Kuantong in China?]

As the Americans moved closer to a mainland attack the Japanese constantly debated whether they would have to fight them on the beaches or retreat to the mountains but their strategies frequently changed – they couldn't make up their minds. Eventually the Americans dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan and the war came to an end.

Japan's War Defeat

After the 1941-45 war defeat the Butokukai (Martial Virtues Society) and Busen were abolished and the Kodokan regained its monopoly of promotion and “over-issued Dan grades for large sums of money. The head of the Kodokan who had never worn a judogi in his life gave out grades to politicians who had also never worn judogis. This was to curry favour with the politicians”.

The Dan grade system was originally devised by Jigoro Kano and was an ingenious means of promoting judo. At the time however both the Kodokan and the Butokukai issued Dan grades. [The Butokukai only had three ranks to start with – Renshi, Kyoshi & Hanshi but it later copied the successful Kodokan grades] In addition there were also other jujitsu schools that issued grades. Grades were issued up to 5th Dan based on ability.

Butokukai and Busen Abolished, Nashimoto Indicted

The one big shock of the war defeat for Abe was the naming by the War Crimes Tribunal of Japanese war criminals. At the head of the list was His Imperial Highness Nashimoto who headed the Butokukai for many years. Apart from this position he had no others. The Allies thought that militarism, imperialism and ultra-nationalism had to be eradicated from Japan and they saw the Butokukai as being a hotbed of both. For that reason they thought that its head should be indicted of war crimes and the organization itself should be dissolved. A week after the announcement a picture appeared in a newspaper of Nashimoto carrying a bundle of belongings being led into Sugamo prison. Many Japanese who thought he was just a figure-head of the Butokukai were shocked at the photo. Abe thought so too and pestered his many Busen friends about this but they were more concerned about famine and national collapse and did not react to his arguments [Abe might have been one of the Kodoha]. Abe argued to his former Busen colleagues that since the Butokuden building still existed the Butokukai and its Busen martial arts college should be revived. Abe was not that diplomatic in his dealings with ex-Busen people and put quite a few backs up. Abe had no organization, supporters or money and was unable to make his views possible. He gradually isolated himself almost completely.

Abe began to promote his petition to release Nashimoto and posted it up all over Kyoto but nobody paid much attention to it. Many thought Abe was deranged. No Busen people signed his petition and Abe called them cowards. Eventually the fact that he was a policeman caused problems and he was warned by his superiors.

The Butokukai tried to reform itself but the following year both it and the Busen were abruptly abolished as was Budo education. Schools lost their martial arts facilities and many budo teachers lost their jobs. Isogai died, Tabata fell upon hard times and

Kurihara ended up doing osteopathy. Abe on account of his contest record got a job with the Kyoto police as judo instructor. Many did not find any work at all.

“In 1949 the Kodokan saw the abolition of the Butokukai as a good opportunity to create the All Japan Judo federation (Zenjuren) as a national controlling body and it announced that it would not recognize either Dan grades or contest rules outside the Kodokan ones. Thus a body was born which publicly gave authority to the Kodokan’s advantageous monopoly”. [see my A History of Judo for a different interpretation}.

“In 1948 the All Japan Championships re-started after a seven year gap due to the war. The ex-Busen judoka were treated as underlings by the grade issuing Kodokan but eventually this meanness became apparent. There were however quite a few who sucked up to the Kodokan people. Abe refused his Kodokan 7th Dan grade”.

Abe’s preoccupation with reviving the Busen and the Butokukai continued but he got increasingly bitter about his lack of support and this focussed on the Kodokan. He could not understand how the Kodokan could issue licences and grades when its head Risei Kano had never worn a judogi and how judo people generally let them get away with it. Abe railed against this perceived wrong but in the process he lost most of his friends and colleagues. Perhaps if Abe’s wife had had three boys instead of three girls he could have redirected his life into training one or more of them up to take on the judo world?

Teaching the Kyoto Police

In 1946 Abe was demobilized with the rank of army captain and took up a job with the Kyoto police as a judo instructor. If he had carried on working for the police he would have received a sum of money on retirement and a pension. He was a pillar of the Kansai (west Japan) judo world and there is no doubt that he occupied a position of authority in the Japanese judo world as a whole. He rented a house in Kyoto and was able to make a living for his wife and family. However he gradually dropped out of sight and now [1986] not one of his fellow judo students from the Busen, or those who he taught or the Kyoto police had any news of him. They didn’t know whether he was alive or dead or where he was living. It was reported that he was spotted in Tokyo during the time of the ’64 Tokyo Olympics but he had changed quite a bit. The author enquired among his old acquaintances as to his whereabouts. One said that he and his oldest daughter were making a living somewhere, maybe in the Tokushima countryside. Another reported that he was in an old people’s home and somebody wondered if he was not dead. One theory was that since he was an eccentric character - maybe gone off the rails a bit - if he was still alive he was perhaps not leading a normal social Japanese style life.

To England

It was about this time that the famous Ishikawa returned from teaching in America. He met up with Abe and asked him if he fancied going to England to teach judo at the London Judo Society. Someone from the UK had approached him about it. Abe decided to go for it and resigned from the Kyoto police in 1956. He was given a hearty farewell party. There is a theory that this job offer in London was rather convenient for all concerned.

In London he found lodgings in Brixton Rd which was not far from the London Judo Society dojo in Vauxhall. His landlord was an elderly Japanese by the name of Torii Kumajiro who had married a British woman. They had no children.

At first Abe was welcomed and local newspapers carried photos of him throwing with Hanegoshi. But gradually relations between him and the LJS soured largely it seems because of his eccentric behaviour.

At the time there were two judo organizations in the UK. The main one (the BJA) was headed by Gunji Koizumi who had been residing in England since about 1906. The Kodokan regarded Koizumi and his organization as an influential base for promoting Kodokan judo and “selling its Dan grades”. Abe could not speak English but managed to communicate his passion for judo by his actions and gestures. Abe’s students increased but from time to time Abe’s views did not coincide with those of Koizumi and his organization.

If Abe had understood how judo was organized in the UK and had been more worldly wise he could have been more courteous to the influential Koizumi and worked to spread his own message in his own dojo – nothing stopped him from doing it. But Abe did not think like that and so Koizumi was forced to announce that Abe had not been sent by the Kodokan and was not licensed to teach judo. Abe reacted by immediately setting up his own organization - the British Judo Council - in opposition. At one point it claimed to have 3000 members.

Abe tried to bring his wife and family to the UK but his wife was opposed. The eldest daughter was about to enter middle school in Japan and the two younger daughters spoke no English at all. Abe’s wife probably often had to disagree with her husband’s suggestions and his somewhat unrealistic views. Abe’s eldest sister Toyoko was 36 years old and was betrothed to a Tokushima man.

Abe however continued to lose a lot of English support because of what was regarded as his eccentric behaviour. For example there was one occasion when Abe clad only in a loincloth (fundoshi) jumped on a horse and rode around a field in central London and caused women to scream [this seems unlikely but there is an identical story of Abe riding a horse wearing his loincloth during a Judo course at the Bisham Abbey Sports Centre in the country]. When Abe was Battalion commander of the Tokushima regiment he often rode a Mongolian horse which was one of the symbols of the commander. Perhaps leaping on the horse was a nostalgic moment for him. [Eric Dominey who was one of the founders of the LJS told me that when Abe lived in the dojo when it was in Vauxhall he filled his rooms up with many caged budgerigars and canaries].

Tokyo champion Watanabe Kisaburo of Chuo University Tokyo came to London to teach judo at the Budokwai and Renshuden in the 1960s. He occasionally went to Manchester where he happened one day to see Abe on the platform. He introduced himself but all Abe could say was “Oh really” and scurry for the exit. Abe it seems had little time for Japanese judo-men. But maybe he was surprised and did not know what to say or perhaps he was just a curt person. I managed to interview a number of British judomen who had been taught by Abe and they mostly said the same thing

about him....”He had wonderful technique...His explanations were very good but.....?”

Touring Europe

Relations between Abe and his new judo organization eventually cooled off. So he bought a van and some judo mats and headed for Europe where he toured Marseilles, Nice, Monaco, Turin and Rome etc teaching judo wherever he could. Sometimes he rented an indoor space, at other times he taught outdoors to adults and children and if nobody was interested he took what other work he could find. He toured other parts of Europe and north Africa including Sweden, Algeria, Dacca. Abe gradually lost muscle and hair to the extent that none of his former students or acquaintances would recognize him. This was the man who enthralled 20,000 spectators at the Meiji Shrine with his phenomenal judo skill!

Abe was not so good at making or keeping money especially in England where the English were strict with it. Nevertheless he sent money back home to his wife and daughters and kept in touch at Christmas time and birthdays. When he first started touring Europe he promised his family that he would only tour for 2-3 years and then return but somehow his absence extended to ten years. Then one day when he had sent a lump sum off to Japan he confessed he had nothing left to get him back to Japan.

Mostly he slept on hard narrow beds in cheap hotels but there were strong clubs in France and elsewhere which used his services and Abe worked with Awazu of the Ritsumeikan university and with Michigami also of Busen where he got the respect he needed. It is claimed that both Michigami and Abe instructed Anton Geesink of Holland.

Back to Japan and Isolation

In 1964 Abe returned to Japan in time for the Tokyo Olympics where one or two reported glimpses him at the judo event. Then he returned to his family home in Kyoto but his wife would not receive him and he had little conversation with his daughters so he slept alone in a separate room. He spent his time reading books or writing and playing Go. Hosotani and other former Busen people heard that he was back and organized a welcome back party one evening. They gathered in a Kyoto restaurant but Abe did not turn up. He said later that he went out but could not remember the location of the restaurant. In 1968 his eldest daughter got married and both her parents sat together at the ceremony but a couple of months later Abe departed from Tokyo Haneda airport and headed for Brussels to continue his peripatetic teaching. In the December of that year he returned to Kyoto again to promote the opening of a dojo in the Butokuden which he called Kyushindo and to recruit members for his new mission which was the foundation of the World Butokukai.

The Butokuden was a very old temple-like building that dated back well over a thousand years. It was in fact originally dedicated to the gods of war (Bushin). It still existed (in its rebuilt form) and had not been destroyed along with the Butokukai. Abe argued that since the Butokuden still existed was it not natural that the HQ of ancient Budo (the Way of the Warrior) should be located there?

It seems as if the war defeat, the dissolution of the Butokukai and the Busen martial arts school and the post-war history of Japan had dropped completely from his mind . Just one theme ran through all he did and that was the resurrection of the Butokukai and resistance to the Kodokan. Like Don Quixote fighting the windmills he set up, without permission, his stall in the front garden of the Butokuden which was now owned by the city of Kyoto.

His family drifted away from him and gradually he lost what assets he had and was forced to move from Kyoto and into increasing obscurity. Few had any idea where he lived. However I managed to find his eldest daughter and learned from her his address which was in a retirement home in Chichibu city in Saitama prefecture.

The Final Years

Without ringing in advance I went to visit him and found him watching TV alone in a narrow room. His eyebrows had grown very bushy but he looked bigger than the average 72 year old Japanese.

He did not appear to be troubled by my appearance. I told him why I had visited which he listened to although he said very little. He did not look as if he did not want to talk. I asked Abe about the five man match of 5th Dans at the Saineikan and told him what others had said about it. Abe said, “No I was given lucky chance at that time. It is an exaggeration to say I handled him easily. Kimura soon became No 1 in Japan again”. We discussed Yamashita Yasuhiro for a bit who Abe thought had retired from competition too early.

Looking back on his life Abe said, “My life in fact ended when I went on active service in the army in 1937. The forty years after the army were more from force of habit while I kept searching for that judo dream. As a result my family suffered. It was the army that forced my severance with the Butokukai and Busen both of which forced us to challenge our limits and ignite our youth. Finally Butokukai and Busen were forcibly shut down and the Kodokan fishing in troubled water emerged as a monopolistic body with which I could not compromise. Somewhat different from my aims and ambitions I ended up searching for a new heaven in foreign countries where I tried to pass on what I believed in. One could say that I ended up having expended all my energy as a wandering teacher.”

There was a sad echo in these words of apology to his family and as I looked around his narrow room I noticed there was little in the way of household goods. I asked Abe if I could get him anything such as a change of clothes or a razor since he needed a shave. He replied simply, ‘I don’t need anything.’ When it was time to depart he grasped my hand silently. His eldest daughter Junko said of her father later that he was not a man to yield to the powerful. He could not resist kicking against the pricks. ‘We are proud of him, she said’

On Nov 17th in the morning Abe went out for a bike ride with a neighbour called Goto. Goto noticed that Abe was not behind him and when he retraced his steps he found Abe squatting on the ground looking very grey. He was taken to the nearby municipal hospital in Chichibu. He had suffered a major heart attack and died on December 1st 1985 surrounded by his daughters.

(Translated by Syd Hoare)

