

Fifty Years of History

Tomoko Muramoto, Director

This year, we are commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Sendai Tenshi-En. Looking back, the half a century seems to me as a fabric woven of joy and sufferings, while God watched over us so lovingly.

In 1931, five Dominican nuns were sent to Japan from France, to establish an educational facility. Their facility was growing steadily. One day, a widow with four children arrived in Sendai looking for a distant relative. At the end of the day, the family, lost and tired, approached a Catholic church. There, the youngest child, a three-year-old girl, started to cry, unable to walk any further.

Inside the church building, Father Bissonet[?] was at the dinner table. Hearing the child cry, he walked outside and found the distressed woman with her four children. When he learned of their predicament, the Father, concerned about their future, contacted the Dominican convent and asked if they could take care of the children.

Mere Marie Dominique Roselle[?], the Director of the convent at that time, saw God's will in this course of events, and asked the headquarters for approval to take in these children. The headquarters approved the request with blessing.

Thus, the facility started taking care of children on April 1, 1933. This part of the organization was named Sendai Tenshi-En (Field of Angels), because the children were entrusted to the protection by the Guardian Angels.

The word spread first among the congregation, and then in the community, that the Dominican convent would raise children as if they were part of a family. People started to come to Tenshi-En, asking the nuns to raise their children.

The number of children at the facility continued to increase. When the old wooden building burned down, a new Western-style modern building was built in 1934. At the time, there were over 50 children at the facility, from infants to school-age children.

The money for raising these children all came from donations from Christians in France and the United States. Most babies brought to the facility were in poor health, making them very difficult to raise.

In April 1940, the modern building caught fire and was partially burned. The building was remodeled after the fire and a new wing was added.

About that time, the world situation was becoming increasingly tense. Japan was expanding its military power. Since the convent and the Tenshi-En facility were located near an army division, there were plans for the army to take over the facilities.

Through the efforts of the congregation and other supporters, the facility escaped requisition, but was converted into a munitions factory. A munitions factory sign was erected at the entrance and the nuns worked as factory workers while raising over 50 children. They made tassels that adorned the officers' military swords.

When World War II began, American and Canadian nuns were detained. Money from overseas was stopped. It is hard to describe the hardship the nuns and the children went through during that time.

The vineyard on premise was converted into a potato field to feed the 50 children and 30 nuns. They ate any edible plants to keep off hunger. Furthermore, they were under strict surveillance by the military police the special political police. The psychological suffering must have been even worse than the physical discomfort.

Still, there were people who provided support in various forms. Although many residents at the facility became ill, no one died of starvation. We owe this fact to the love of God and to Sister Kiyo Yoshinari, who handled the difficult negotiations with the outside world before, during and after the war.

The facility, which was a munitions factory at that time, was hit by 28 direct fire bomb shots during the Sendai Air Raid on July 9, 1945. The buildings burned to the ground within minutes.

The nuns could not take any belongings out, but they led all the children to safety, without a single death or injury. We cannot help but see the protection of God.

In March 1946, the convent and the Tenshi-En buildings were rebuilt.

After the war, there was a surge of children orphaned by the war. In January 1948, the Child Welfare Law was enacted, and child consultation centers were established. Children started to come to Tenshi-En through these centers. At that time, many children suffered from malnutrition or illness. Some infants died within hours of coming to Tenshi-En. The remains of the 51 children in the Tsurugaya charnel house are mostly from that period. We can imagine the tragic circumstances of the children immediately following the war.

When the American occupation forces came, American-Japanese children began to come to Tenshi-En. The Director of the facility, Marie Anies de Zange[?], who was an American, knew how difficult it was for children of mixed heritage to assimilate into the Japanese society. She contacted the occupation forces and arranged for adoption by American families. Many of these children grew up happy, and some families still write to us. Looking back, this was probably the best way for the children.

As the Japanese economy recovered after the war and continued to grow, the type of children coming to Tenshi-En also changed. The facility had to expand its functions to include medical and educational activities.

Summer camps at Fukushima and Iwate Prefectures are happy memories for the children.

The wooden barracks built in haste after the war became old and dangerous, so the site for a new facility had to be found. The current site was chosen from several possible sites.

The Dominican church donated the land and the old building. Using this as the foundation, a social welfare corporation, the Rosario Virgin Mary Association was established in March 1966. The Sendai Tenshi-En was transferred into this organization. In March 1969, the current Tenshi-En facility was completed, coinciding with the organizations's 35th anniversary.

As more older children began coming to Tenshi-En, different functions were required of the facility. Treatment of emotionally handicapped children and aftercare of children who have left the facility are becoming important challenges.

Children are always the weakest in the society, and they are the ones who bear the burden of societal illness. We must do what little we can to correct the problem. I hope we can be responsible as adults for the well-being of the children, by feeling the children's pain as if it were ours.

In March 1976, we purchased two condominiums as aftercare facilities, where our graduates can live for a while until they become financially and socially independent.

Since April 1974, the children have been involved in farming on the land owned by the Dominican Convent. Also, there are the annual Christmas party and other events, where local residents and the children's guardians are invited. Through these activities, we hope our children will learn to interact with the community and grow up to be responsible citizens.

Looking back the 50 years, I believe we were able to go through a number of difficult as well as happy events, because of the grace of God and the help from many friends. God will always help the weakest in the world. We hope to keep walking towards the new era, together with our children, always looking to God for help.

If you would like to make a donation to the Sendai Tenshi-en Orphanage in Japan you can send donations through the Beltran & Chandler Attorneys:

Sendai Tenshi-en Orphanage Fund

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