



the only woman in the room

Matt Wilce takes a look at the life and times of Beate Sirota Gordon '39, author of Articles 14 and 24 of the Japanese Constitution

The ballroom on the sixth floor of the Dai-Ichi Building in Ginza is filled with a thick fug of stale cigarette smoke and the click clack sound of multiple Underwood typewriters. Among the piles of carbon paper, crumpled balls of aborted drafts, reference books, library copies of the Soviet and Weimar constitutions, ashtrays filled with discarded Chesterfields and uniformed colleagues sits a young 22-year-old civilian woman. "The family is the basis of human society," she types as she begins her latest draft before stopping to re-read the US Constitution, a document that she'd first studied at The American School in Japan a few years previously. She switches her attention to the Japanese Civil Code and carefully reads through it with the dictionary at hand. "Woman are to be regarded as incompetent," Article 4 clearly states.

It is Tuesday February 5, 1946 and week-old snow still lies on the ground in Ginza. In three days time the 20 men and four women sequestered in the ballroom must present their draft of Japan's new constitution to the Steering Committee. The directive from SCAP last October was clear—emancipation and suffrage for the women of Japan. Gen. MacArthur had not been moved by a sudden surge of feminism though, as he saw women's rights as a way to bolster the anti-war emphasis he aimed the new constitution to have. "I want to discredit the military. Women don't like war," was the terse, pragmatic rationale he'd given his protégé Bonner Fellers. It seemed only natural to those involved that the job of drafting the language that would assign such freedoms in the new constitution should fall to a woman—Beate Sirota '39.



Top left: Japanese class at ASU, Hashimoto-sensei, Maria Munoz, Lily Sagoyan and Beate. Top right: Class of 1939 Baccalaureate Service at Tokyo Union Church. Middle left: A high school dance; at first Beate (center right) felt like a wallflower. Middle right: Eloise Cunningham '18 leads the Girls' Chorus in 1937. Bottom left & right: At the Yokohama docks waving off Headmaster Amos with June Stewart-Scott '39 in 1941.

All afternoon the constitutionalists, who'd been divided into seven committees the previous Sunday, work away at their assigned articles, cognizant that time is running out. Desks are scattered around the room in clusters. Penciled-in notes and additions transition to newly typed pages that in turn are re-read and annotated further. At the desk adjacent to Beate sits her friend Eleanor Hadley, a talented economist, Asia specialist and future *zaibatsu*-buster. Eleanor is working on the economic and antitrust reforms that seek to make the distribution of income more equal and the economy more responsive to the interests of the people.

At the suggestion of Col. Charles Kades, Chairman of the Steering Committee, Beate looks again at the 1889 Meiji Constitution, but finds little inspiration there. In turn, she takes up the 1919 Weimar Constitution, which proves to be much more progressive in social welfare policies and equal rights for both sexes when it comes to marriage. Engrossed in her work, Beate barely realizes the time until she looks up and sees that it is dark outside. When she gets up to open the window for some fresh air—and respite from the contrails of cigarette smoke that glide toward the ceiling—the sharp winter breeze hits her face. Across the bombed-out city lie large swathes of blackness. Looking at her watch, she sees that is already 6 o'clock. Not wanting to miss dinner for the second night in a row, she prepares to leave for the Kanda Kaikan where she is billeted. Col. Kades is still writing as Beate leaves. Across the street and the still waters of its outer moat, the walls of the Imperial Palace loom in the shadows. On Saturday, they will present the first draft constitution that will forever change the Emperor's role and lay out a new foundation for the country, but it will take another 50 years before the world at large finds out about Beate and how a recent college graduate ended up with such responsibility.

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Born in 1923 in Vienna, Beate Sirota was the only child of renowned pianist Leo Sirota and his wife Augustine. She spent her early childhood touring Europe with her mother and father, a Ukrainian Jew who had fled war-torn Russia and settled in Austria. Exposed to English, Russian, German and French, she quickly developed a flair for languages and added Japanese to the list once

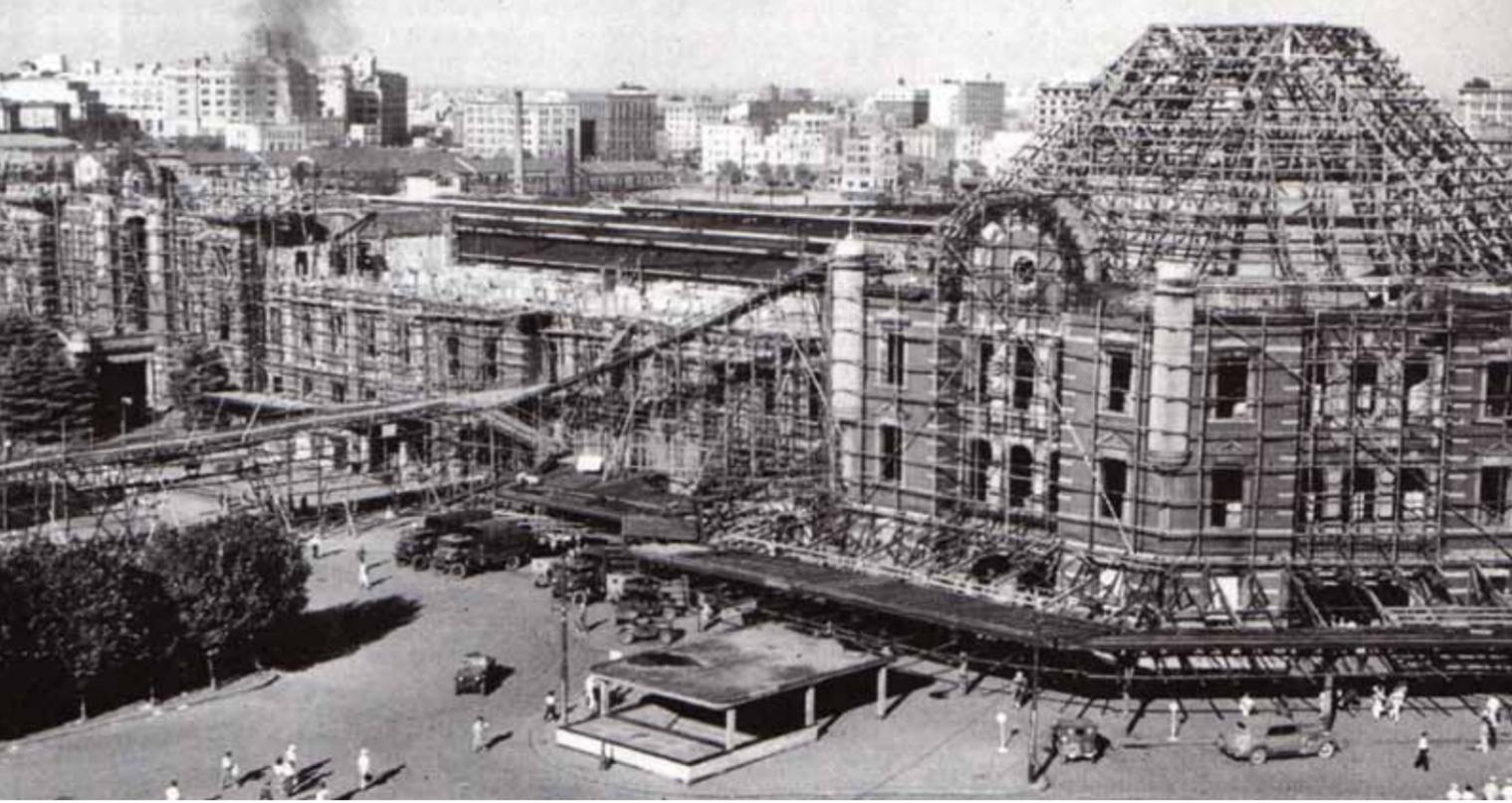


the family moved to Tokyo and Spanish once she went to college. With growing instability sweeping the European continent and a series of concerts canceled, the family decided that it might be the right time to visit the Far East and Leo Sirota accepted an invitation to become a professor at the Imperial Academy of Music – now Tokyo University of the Arts. Traveling overland by train from Vienna to Vladivostok and then onward by ship, they arrived four weeks later in Yokohama. It was 1929 and their intent was to spend six months in Japan, before returning to Austria, but as circumstances changed they would end up staying 16 years.

Beate started out attending the German School in Tokyo, but over time the family's Jewish background and the changing political landscape in Germany led to a divergence. Once Beate received a C grade for department due to her voicing opinions in opposition to those held by her teachers, who were increasingly influenced by National Socialism, the family decided it was becoming "too Nazified" and that it was time to switch schools. Beate enrolled at The American School in 1936 and made the adjustment from strict Germanic education, where pupils were still subjected to corporal punishment. At first ASIJ struck her as "a little too informal" compared to the rigors of her old school, but soon she settled into school life. A turning point was when her mother arranged a date for her with a good-looking Russian boy who was a friend of her father's student. After being depressed that she was reduced to being a wallflower at previous school dances, Beate was delighted to finally have someone to dance with and at last she felt that she "belonged."

Although she was still only 15-and-a-half, Beate graduated from ASIJ in 1939. Her dream of going to the Sorbonne was thwarted by the imminent war in Europe and so she left Japan for college in the United States. Immigration visas were a challenge, but her parents were able to obtain documentation with the assistance of their friend and neighbor Koki Hirota, a former foreign minister and future prime minister. Beate set sail with her parents for San Francisco to study modern languages at Mills College.

Once she'd adjusted to making her own bed and other household chores that the family's servants had always taken care of, Beate settled into campus life. Frustrated by having to "learn" Japanese one-on-one with a professor who had never set foot



Top: Bombed-out Tokyo Station under reconstruction in 1945. Bottom left: Shirasu Jiro (center), aide to the Foreign Minister, with Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida on the far right. Middle: Gen. Courtney Whitney, MacArthur's right hand man at GHQ. Bottom right: Children warm their hands on the street in Tokyo circa 1947.

in Japan, she consoled herself with daily milkshakes, which she described as “nectar.” The year passed and summer vacation brought a trip back to Japan—fellow ASIJs Jack Curtis '44 and Barbara Curtis Adachi '40, who were on the same ship, provided companionship during the Pacific crossing.

By the time Beate's parents made their visit to her in the summer of the following year, changing circumstances brought portentous complications. First their ship, the *Tatsuta Maru*, was denied the right to dock in San Francisco as she was carrying a cargo of silk, which was under US boycott at the time. Although at the end of the trip her mother expressed a desire to stay in the States with her young daughter, Leo Sirota was firm that he should return to Japan to honor his contract with the Imperial Academy of Music. Despite the warnings of friends and the growing tensions between the two countries, the Sirotas bid goodbye to their daughter again. Unfazed even when the officials in Honolulu told them they would require FBI clearance to continue on to Japan. They eventually were cleared to depart and took passage on what was to be the last American ship to Japan. Ten days after they docked in Yokohama, Japanese bombers attacked Pearl Harbor.

During the War, Beate was completely cut off from her parents in Japan. Although she had been frugal with living expenses and her tuition at Mills was relatively low, left on her own in the United States, she needed to find a means to support herself. The FBI, Office of Strategic Services (the precursor to the CIA) and the Office of War Information were all desperate for a Japanese speakers and all came to campus looking to recruit. (Beate would later claim that there were only 60 Japanese-speaking Caucasians in the whole country when War broke out. Her future husband Joseph Gordon, himself a Japanese specialist, disagreed and thought it was higher—closer to 65!) As a non-citizen, a job at the FBI was out of the question, but Beate was offered a position at the CBS Radio Listening Post, which was still under civilian control at the beginning of the War.

Tasked with translating Japanese broadcasts, Beate and the other recruits struggled to make sense of the higher-order Japanese and vocabulary such as “aircraft carrier” that they'd never heard. Unable to find a dictionary, which had all been bought up by the military, Beate set out to make her own word lists as a reference using a multilingual dictionary she found that enabled her to go from

Russian or Chinese into English and Japanese. Her perseverance paid off and she was hired during the two-week test period after correctly translating a broadcast referring to a Japanese submarine in the vicinity of San Francisco that the Listening Post in Portland, Oregon, hadn't caught. When CBS asked her to stay on full-time once term restarted, she got permission from Mills to no longer attend classes and only submit papers and take the exams. For six months she worked full-time while completing her final three credits of college.

In 1942, the CBS Listening Post became part of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Beate stayed on as the only woman in the San Francisco office. The job enabled her to occasionally glean news of her parents—an oblique reference to a concert of her father's offering proof they were still alive. After graduating from Mills, Beate transferred to the Office of War Information (OWI) where she scripted propaganda programs in Japanese to be read on air by nisei broadcasters. Ironically, when Beate returned to Japan she never met a single person who had heard the radio shows—possibly because shortwave radios were rarely available, even to soldiers.

Towards the end of the War in the spring of 1945, Beate relocated to New York City and took a job in the foreign news department of *Time* magazine as a researcher for staff writers covering Japan. She maintained that only men were actually allowed to be writers, even though they were often intellectually inferior to the cosmopolitan and multilingual female researchers who were held accountable for any mistakes published.

Beate continued to look for scraps of information about her parents in Japan, unsure of their whereabouts and safety. She was not to know at the time that like most “alien neutrals” they had been evacuated to Karuizawa in Nagano, where they moved into their summer home. Food was scarce and daily visits from the *Kempetai* (secret police) kept the aliens and diplomats under close scrutiny. On their July 31 visit the *Kempetai* ordered Beate's father to report to the police station to be held for questioning the following week. After a week of sleepless nights, he woke on the morning of August 6 terrified, but ready to report to the police. Nobody came to arrest him. Nothing happened. At 8:15 that morning, the Enola Gay had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. A week later Japan surrendered.

In New York, the streets were filled with celebration. News of the devastating firebombing of Tokyo and the effects of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki began to filter in and Beate grew increasingly concerned about the fate of her friends and family. It took until October for a *Time* correspondent dispatched to Tokyo to telex with news that they were indeed safe and alive. After celebrating the good news with Champagne, Beate began to look for a way to get back to Japan. She spent her days off in Washington, DC, investigating leads for possible jobs until she heard that the Foreign Economic Administration was looking for people to work under MacArthur. She applied and as she was now a naturalized US citizen with experience at the FCC and OWI, they snapped her up. On Christmas Eve 1945, she was back “home” in Tokyo.

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It is March 4, 1946 and a top-secret meeting is being held in room 602, the conference room on the sixth floor of SCAP headquarters adjacent to General MacArthur’s office. The participants have been told that they will have to stay in the building until the discussions are over, no matter how long that takes. Inside the room the Japanese contingent comprising of the Home Minister Joji Matsumoto, Tatsuo Sato the head of the First Department of the Legislative Bureau, Jiro Shirasu the Deputy Chief of the Central Liaison Office and two translators from the Foreign Office sit at a large round table with the Americans. Gen. Whitney and Col. Kades head up the US side along with Lt. Col. Rowell and Comm. Hussey. A team of translators headed by the quick-witted intelligence officer Lt. Gordon provides support for the officials. Beate Sirota is the only woman in the room.

The meeting opens with Matsumoto handing his latest draft of the Japanese Constitution to Whitney. “This draft has not yet been discussed and approved by the Cabinet. It is nothing more than a preliminary draft,” he carefully explains. Kades hands his copy of the document over to Beate and Lt. Gordon and closely studies each section that they quickly translate. The Japanese draft is missing the preamble, prompting a sharp reminder from Kades that the inclusion of the “MacArthur preamble” was non-negotiable. Lengthy discussions about each subsequent article ensue with heated debate between Kades and Matsumoto over many of the



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Top: The Dai-Ichi Building in Ginza where MacArthur and the Government Section worked during the Occupation. To its left are the Imperial Theater, Tokyo Kaikan and the Meiji Insurance building where the Allied Council was headquartered. Middle: Charles Kades, Guy Swope, Colonel Tilton and Frank Rizzo in the conference room of GHQ in the Dai-Ichi Building. Bottom right: University of Maryland Conference—the first and last time the drafters of the Constitution met after 1946. Bottom left: Gen. MacArthur exiting GHQ.

points of divergence between the US and Japanese proposals. The atmosphere in the room is tense and increasingly confrontational. Kades, hands shake so hard that the table vibrates with his anger. Matsumoto, shocked that a young upstart like Kades is arguing with him, grows increasingly frustrated and impatient. Not waiting for Shirasu, who is translating, Matsumoto asks exasperately in English, “Have you come to Japan to correct our Japanese?”

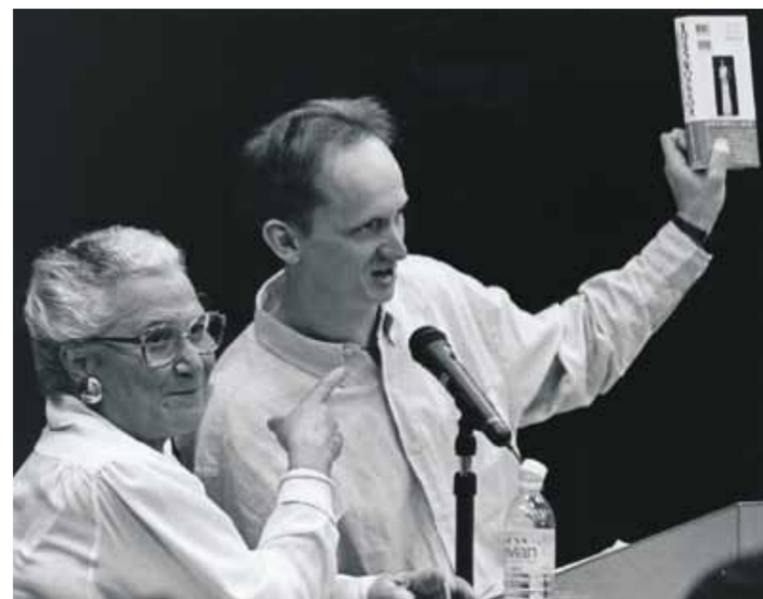
Four hours in and virtually no progress has been made. At 2:30pm they break for a dreary lunch of prepackaged C and K rations—canned pork and beans, crackers, chocolate, and cigarettes. Coffee is dispensed from five-gallon urns. Matsumoto thinks that the US army rations taste like he is chewing wax, but eats them anyway. After lunch he makes an excuse that he has to leave GHQ early to attend a meeting with Cabinet members at the Prime Minister’s office. Worried that a fistfight might actually break out, he decides it is better to leave and plans to send word to Sato later that he won’t be returning due to an illness. Sato is left with the interpreters to continue on through the afternoon and evening. At 8:30pm they began an article-by-article discussion.

During the evening Lt. Gordon notices that the British-educated Shirasu has left a literal translation of the English draft lying on the table. He takes it as a sign that the delegation had come to the meeting prepared to surrender, but with the aim of making a last-ditch play for their version. As the evening drags on, the discussions continue with less rancor. It is past 2am that the civil rights section that Beate has drafted comes up for consideration. The Japanese men at the table have no inclination that she is responsible for the language that she now has the job of translating. To them, she is merely at the meeting to translate—admittedly very skillfully. Even Sato makes a note that she understands Japanese well, is sharp, and conveys exactly the meaning of what he is saying.

Everyone is tired and fighting sleep, yet Sato begins to argue against the article’s guarantee of women’s rights as fiercely as he had on behalf of the Emperor earlier. Hearing that he considered her article inappropriate, Beate snaps awake. Ever astute, Kades steps in to remind the Japanese that the “slip of a girl” translating has supported several of their positions and reveals that Beate is actually responsible for the section on women’s rights. “This article was written by Miss Sirota,” he announces. “She was brought up in



Beate during her 1996 visit to ASIJ.



Japan, knows the country well, and appreciates the point of view of Japanese women. There is no way in which the article can be faulted. She has her heart set on this issue. Why don't we just pass it?" This is the opportunity for the Japanese team to repay the kindness and respect Beate had shown earlier and they concede.

The remaining articles are not as straightforward though and with 92 left to discuss at 3am the end of the process is still a long way off. Negotiations continue as the wintry dawn breaks outside and more C and K rations do little to lift the energy levels and combat the stale air. Bloodshot eyes struggle to continue with the line-by-line scrutiny required. At 10am Beate is fortunate enough to be told she can leave and is soon dead asleep in her billet. The rest of the team continue with the interminable process until 6pm—32 hours after they began.

The following day on the evening of March 6, the revised draft is published as the work of the Japanese government. Gen. MacArthur announces his satisfaction with the "new and epoch-making" constitution making no reference to the work of SCAP behind the scenes in its creation. Beate's role in writing Articles 14 and 24 is consigned to be secret history for decades to come.

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Following her work for SCAP, Beate returned to New York, where her parents had already relocated to, and she was reunited with Lt. Gordon, who she had begun dating. The pair married in 1948. Beate took a number of different jobs before eventually returning to her primary interest, the performing arts. In 1953, she was invited to work on a special issue of *Theater Arts Magazine* on Japan, which led to a part-time position at the Japan Society. Later as Director of Student Programs, Beate provided career and job counseling to Japanese students in New York, including Yoko Ono, with whom she maintained a life-long friendship. She also worked with visual artists, arranging exhibits and lecture-demonstrations, including the first American visit of the renowned woodblock artist, Shiki Munakata. In 1958, she was appointed the Society's Director of Performing Arts and in this capacity, she introduced a number of Japanese performing artists to the New York public, helping to develop many careers including that of Toshi Ichianagi, now one of Japan's foremost composers. In 1960, Beate became a consultant to the Asia Society performing arts program, expanding her activities from Japan to other countries in Asia. She travelled widely looking for

talented performers, bringing everything from Korean shaman and Chinese opera to Japanese court music and Bhutanese royal dancers to the States, and produced the first Asian performances at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

In 1970, she was named full-time Director of the Performing Arts Program of the Asia Society in New York and, in 1987, became the Society's Director of Performances, Films, and Lectures. Beate was much lauded for her work as an arts producer and a tireless promoter of Asian art forms, receiving numerous awards, among them the American Dance Guild Award (1978), two Dance on Camera Festival Awards (1984, 1985), a Bessie Award (1990), Ryoko Akamatsu Award (2005), and the John D. Rockefeller Award from the Asian Cultural Council (1997) in recognition of her "extraordinary contributions in introducing American scholars, artists, and general audiences to the performing arts of Asia and in increasing the American understanding and appreciation of Asian dance, theater, and music traditions." Once Beate's role in writing the Japanese constitution became public in the 1990s, she also received the Order of the Sacred Treasure from the Japanese government in 1998.

In April 1996, thanks to the efforts of librarian Vicky Downs (FF 1959-99) and staff member Keiko Auckerman, Beate returned to ASIJ to speak to students and staff about her wartime experiences. She addressed the whole high school student body in a packed Ricketson Theater and also spent time with Japanese and Social Studies classes.

Beate would also often run into ASIJ alumni through her work in the United States. Sakiko Suga '09 recalls paying her a visit in New York a couple of summers ago. "Her living room was filled with historical treasures including original cement pieces from the World Trade Center when they first built it—she mentioned that she was going to donate the pieces to the memorial—and a signed photograph of MacArthur. She was such a lovely lady, she offered me sweets and tea and we spoke for about three hours. At the end of our conversation, she spoke to me about her vision of the world. She said that it was far more important to look for similarities among people than differences for different cultures to coexist," Sakiko remembers. Beate, who spent a lifetime promoting equality, compassion and cross-cultural understanding told her, "We are all more alike than different."

Beate passed away on December 30, 2012. ◊