

Photos courtesy Virginia Ohlson



Virginia Ohlson (far right) and interpreter Mitsuko Saito with the Disciples Bible Class in 1948.

Virginia M. Ohlson, RN, PhD, FAAN

VIRGINIA OHLSON: AMBASSADOR TO POSTWAR JAPAN

MELODEE YOHE & RAMONA CASS

That May evening in Japan was still, warm and wet, though the rain had subsided. It was 1947. World War II had ended in the fall of 1945. Now Virginia Ohlson, a young nurse from Illinois, was going to Japan to join several other civilian American nurses serving with the United States Occupation Army, on the staff of the Supreme Command of Allied Powers. Their challenge: to help Japanese nurses, doctors and government officials re-

establish and reorganize nursing education and practice in Japan.

As the army bus wended its way over narrow village streets from the airport to a Tokyo hotel, Virginia viewed her new world with great anticipation. Through open doors of storefront, dimly lit, tiny homes, she saw families seated on their floors, evidently cooling off in the fresh, rain-washed breeze.

As she looked, she prayed, "God, be with

me in this new country. Help me to know and understand the Japanese people. Help them to know and understand me. Just as the doors to their homes are open, may they open their minds and hearts to me. And may I find ways to open my mind and heart to them."

Virginia's prayer reflected the desire of her heart. She had dedicated her life to serving God, but the details weren't all going according to her plans. Still, she wanted to discover

and follow God's direction.

For several years Virginia had felt God was calling her to be a missionary. This conviction began at home through her mother's strong spiritual influence. But Mildred Nelson influenced her most.

Mildred was a student at the Evangelical Covenant Church's North Park College in Chicago while Virginia was a high-school student at the academy run by the same denomination. They shared similar interests, especially missions, and became close friends through extracurricular activities and several classes taken together. After Mildred graduated and went to China as a missionary, the two friends continued their relationship through correspondence.

When Virginia finished high school, she continued her studies at North Park College. At first she thought she'd prepare for teaching. But her family was struggling financially, so wanting to help support herself she also enrolled in some secretarial courses. "All the time I had a nagging interest in nursing," she remembers. "I wanted very much to be a nurse.

"My dad's sister was a nurse. When I was young she used to tell me interesting stories about nursing. But my dad thought she had to work very hard and wasn't enthusiastic about nursing for me.

The Making of a Public Health Nurse

"Possibly the person who had the greatest nursing influence on me was Ruth Nordlund, a public health nurse. When I was about thirteen years old she used to tell me how she cared for people in their homes and taught members of their families to help them. I never forgot her, and as I grew older and continued to think about nursing, I hoped to become a public health nurse some day."

Finally, Virginia convinced her family that she really wanted to be a nurse. She chose the Swedish Covenant Hospital School of Nursing.

Eager to begin, Virginia was the first person in the new class to check in on a cold February day in 1934. Because of a peculiar custom, unknown to her at the time, registering first made her vice president of the class. The first girl to arrive in the September section of the class was already functioning as president.

At a get-acquainted tea the first day of school, the director of nursing asked the incoming students why they had decided to

study nursing. Without hesitation Virginia announced, "I have come to this school because I want to become a public health nurse."

Surprised, the director exclaimed, "That's a premature goal. You don't even know what nursing is yet; how can you be so sure you want to be a public health nurse?" The director did not know Virginia or her determination.

After graduation Virginia couldn't find a job in public health. So she worked for a year as an operating room nurse at Swedish Covenant Hospital in Chicago.

But she also took initiative to reach her goal. "I contacted the nursing director at the Illinois Department of Health in Springfield and asked her to keep me in mind if some position in public health nursing became



A public health nurse from Tokyo's model health center visits a mother and baby in 1948.

available. She helped me get a public health nursing traineeship at the University of Chicago and a job at the city health department in Evanston where I worked for seven years."

During that time, Mildred came home on furlough from China, and Virginia accompanied her on a one-month missions tour in the West—Colorado, California and Washington. "Almost every night I attended various church meetings and young peoples' summer camps, listening to Mildred talk about missions and China, wondering if that was God's leading for my life."

Virginia decided it was God's leading and became a missionary volunteer of the Evangelical Covenant Church. In 1943, to prepare for nursing service in China, she began

attending classes part-time at the University of Chicago to earn her bachelor of science degree with a major in public health nursing.

Doors: Closed to China, Open to Japan

By the time she finished her studies in 1946, China was closed not only to missionaries but to all foreigners. That's when the opportunity came to go to Japan with the Army of Occupation and serve with the Supreme Command of Allied Powers (SCAP). "I took the position in Japan, thinking that the experience might prepare me for service in China someday when it was again open to outsiders and missionaries. I felt keenly that God had some special work for me and was leading me in that direction."

Virginia was recruited by Grace Alt, the first Chief of Nursing Affairs of SCAP's Public Health and Welfare section of the General Headquarters Offices. Two years later, when Grace returned to the United States, Virginia was appointed Chief of Nursing Affairs.

The American nurses functioned as consultants, collaborating with Japanese nurses in government offices and teaching institutions. Early in the occupation the nurses had to assess the conditions in hospitals and schools of nursing. They found them even worse than expected.

During its long war effort, Japan had sacrificed civilian health care to focus on military needs. Nurses and patients still lived with very poor conditions.

"Nurses were malnourished and many, with no shoes, suffered from chilblains on both their hands and feet. Buildings were badly in need of repair; all removable metal had been scrapped for the war effort; many buildings had no central heating and no central cooking facilities. Families of hospitalized patients had to provide bedding and personal care items, charcoal to cook meals, and even someone to care for the patients. Since water pipes had been scrapped for metal, nurses had to walk long distances to carry water for patients.

"It was a pitiful, difficult situation. After visiting a hospital, I often walked away feeling very inadequate and helpless."

But no handwringing here. "Fortunately, Japan had a core of well-prepared nurses who had been educated before the war years. They and the consulting American nurses set the pattern for the future of nursing education and practice in Japan. We were facilitators, helping them get through the barriers that

INTERNATIONAL HONORS

Numerous organizations have honored Virginia Ohlson for her distinguished service.

- 1955 "For Nursing Improvement in Japan," awarded by National Ministry of Health of Japan
- 1955 "For Services Rendered in Behalf of Nursing Education and Service in Japan," awarded by Japanese Nurses Association
- 1955 "For Contribution to Japanese Nursing Under the Allied Occupation," awarded by the Supreme Command of Allied Powers
- 1966 "Distinguished Service Award,"

- awarded by North Park College and Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois
- 1973 "Distinguished Alumnus Award," awarded by North Park College and Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois
- 1976 "Pearl McIver Award—ANA for Distinguished Service in Public Health Nursing," awarded by American Nurses Association
- 1980 "Award of Merit for Distinguished Service in Public Health," awarded by Illinois Public Health Association
- 1982 "First International Honorary Membership Award," awarded by the Japanese Nursing Association for Advancement of

Nursing in Japan

- 1982 "Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare Award," awarded by Minister of Health for Promotion of Japanese Nursing Education
- 1982 Honorary Vice-President of the American Public Health Association for the United States
- 1983 Honorary Degree: Doctor of Humane Letters, awarded by North Park College and Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois
- 1987 "Distinguished Service Award," awarded by the Alumni Association, University of Illinois, Chicago, Illinois

hindered progress at a time when the status of nursing, as well as the status of women in general, was very low."

The nurses set up three demonstration schools of nursing, two in Tokyo and one in Okayama in south-central Japan. They developed refresher courses—offered throughout the country—to train leaders in public health nursing, midwifery, and nursing education and practice. Model health centers were established as training centers, first in Tokyo, but soon all across Japan. "Our goal was to provide patterns of education and service which might be duplicated in hospitals, newly developing nursing schools, health centers and teaching centers all over the country."

As a result of the Japanese and American nurses' efforts, the government passed a new nurse practice act. This legislation not only regulated the practice of nursing, midwifery and public health nursing, but also spelled out minimum standards of nursing and established guidelines for accrediting schools and examining applicants for licensure.

The Japanese Nursing Association (JNA) had lost its status with the International Council of Nurses (ICN) during World War II. Japanese and American nurses pooled their skills to reorganize the JNA and regain its ICN recognition.

Requirements were met in 1949, but ICN policy required that a country being admitted into membership had to send a representative to the international congress. Due to travel restrictions during the occupation, no Japanese nurses could leave the country. So Virginia was chosen to represent Japan at that

historic ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden.

Virginia's efforts contributed greatly to the rebuilding of nursing in Japan. But what about her earlier sense that God was calling her to be a missionary? Just as she had prayed that first night in Japan, she found ways to open her mind and heart to the Japanese people.

A Hunger for God's Word

The Japanese nurses discovered that Virginia was a Christian and were eager for her Bible teaching. "I had to be very careful not to make the nurses feel that their attendance at my classes was expected since I held a high position in the occupation. The Japanese have great respect for authority and often behave according to what they think is the expected norm."



Virginia Ohlson with interpreter Hsin Hsin Chung, RN, at a Japanese Nurses Association meeting in 1949.

When the Americans had to leave China under the new Communist regime, several missionaries from the Evangelical Covenant Church came to Japan to continue their work. Among them was Ruth Edlund, a nurse. Later the denomination sent another nurse, Shirley Lindstrom, from the United States to teach English Bible classes to interested Japanese student nurses and to try to establish Nurses Christian Fellowship (NCF) in Japan.

"Ruth, Shirley and I worked together with a small core of Japanese nurses to begin NCF work. The organization grew rapidly under Ruth and Shirley's leadership. Weekly Bible classes were offered in several nursing schools in Tokyo and other areas. Monthly NCF meetings began in a centrally located area in Tokyo. Sometimes over a hundred students and graduate nurses would attend.

Although Tokyo was Virginia's headquarters, she traveled to many parts of the country for her work. Word of her interest in the Bible spread quickly. "Nurses in the cities where I stayed would ask me to teach the Bible to nurses in their hospitals and schools. I met with them in the evenings so the studies would not conflict with their work schedules or mine."

The occupation lasted four more years after Virginia's arrival in Japan. But by July 1951 all the American nurses of SCAP and the Army of Occupation had left Japan.

Researching Effects of the Atom Bombs

After only six months at home, Virginia returned to Japan, this time to Hiroshima as a public health nursing consultant for the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, a re-

**“Go into
all the world . . .”**

Mark 16:15



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search and educational organization of the United States Energy Commission. The Commission was established to determine the immediate and long-range effects of atomic radiation on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

When the Commission's current director of nursing returned to the United States, Virginia was appointed to that position in Hiroshima. Another American nurse was assigned to the Commission in Nagasaki. Virginia worked with about thirty Japanese nurses, one of whom served as nursing director, a Japanese counterpart to her own role.

The Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission provided a van to transport patients from outlying areas to the clinics. But not all could make the trip even then. "One of the first things I had to do was set up a system for nurses to visit patients in their homes. The nurses were to do assessments and take tests and measurements important to the research studies.

"We saw a lot of terrible conditions. This was six years after the bomb had been dropped. In the early years, many children were born anencephalic or with other anomalies. We saw the results of severe burns, cataracts with resulting blindness caused by the intense flash of the atomic bomb, crippled and handicapped people, and many patients of all ages with various stages of leukemia. While I was in Hiroshima, there was still a high incidence of stillborn babies due to poor prenatal care, malnutrition, leukemia and tuberculosis in the mothers.

"We had to ask families to bring their

stillborn babies into the clinic for examination before burial. This was very hard on the nurses and extremely difficult for me too. I often felt useless, embarrassed and guilty. But it was never the Japanese nurses or patients who made me feel those things.

"The Japanese are a very stoic people with a unique capacity to accept things that cannot be changed. No doubt there were a lot of covered feelings. The calm and composure with which they dealt with fear, pain and suffering were always difficult for me to comprehend."

Virginia's Bible study ministry continued during her time with the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission. "By the time I arrived in Hiroshima the nurses there knew I was a Christian. They asked me to teach a Bible class and set up weekly meetings in a nearby church. Attendance was voluntary, yet, in time, over three-fourths of the staff nurses came to those weekly Bible studies."

Back by Special Invitation

Virginia worked with the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission for approximately one year. Then, after the peace treaty between Japan and the United States was signed, the Japanese government asked her to return to work with Japanese nurses. So, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, in 1952 Virginia returned to Japan for the third time.

"During the occupation years, I saw all the war-torn, devastated conditions of the Japanese health care facilities. None of the unpleasant things could be covered. I had often felt the humiliation and hurt of the Japanese

nurses as they remembered and tried to share their memories of better times with the American nurses.

"So I was gratified to know that the Japanese nurses trusted me enough to want me to come back again and work with them at a national level. This was one of the finest compliments of my professional life.

"During this assignment, I did not have the same responsibility for program planning as I had during the occupation. Rather, I was to work with the Japanese nurses on projects which they initiated. I traveled a great deal, visiting schools of nursing, hospitals and health centers; participating in professional conferences and meetings; helping with activities related to the new nursing legislation; and working closely with the Japanese Nursing Association, particularly in their expanding publication and continuing education programs.

In December 1954 Virginia returned to the United States, after seven years and eight months of service in Japan. Those years helped shape Virginia's professional future. "They gave me a whole new insight into the complexities of cultural differences. The opportunities I had helped me recognize the tremendous need for a Christian witness in secular institutions and agencies. I knew that when I got back home, I would always affiliate with secular institutions."

A Center for Crosscultural Learning

In 1955, after completing a master's degree in nursing education at the University of Chicago, Virginia joined the faculty of the nursing department at the same institution.

Then in 1963 she joined the College of Nursing faculty at the University of Illinois where she was appointed head of the Department of Public Health Nursing. At the same time, she continued her studies at the University of Chicago, completing her Ph.D. in education in 1969.

Virginia resigned her position as head of public health nursing in 1980 and was appointed assistant dean of the College of Nursing's Office for International Studies. "Its purpose is to facilitate the development of nursing internationally through a two-directional involvement of faculty and students. Our international graduate students are nursing leaders in their countries; most are nursing educators or administrators. We assist them through the application and enrollment process and work with them in various crosscultural nursing studies."

In 1984 Virginia retired from her position at the University of Illinois. But, two months later, she accepted an invitation to return to the College of Nursing where she continues to work part-time in the College's international program.

"In 1986 the College of Nursing was designated as the first global World Health Organ-

ization Collaborating Center for Nursing. As such we cooperate with the World Health Organization in the interest of its goal: Health for All by the Year 2000 through Primary Health Care."

Though Virginia has had many opportunities to affiliate with Christian institutions, she has never regretted her choice to remain in a secular setting. "In a place where not everyone has the same religious orientation, students and faculty find out very soon where you stand. Knowing I am a Christian, they often seek me out for a listening ear. On many occasions students have said to me, 'I wanted you to be my advisor because I knew you were a Christian.' Also, I've worked with the Nurses Christian Fellowship group at the College and, at times, been their sponsor."

A World of Influence

Numerous organizations have honored Virginia for her distinguished service over the years. While each award holds great meaning for her, she especially prizes the action of the Japanese Nursing Association: In 1982 JNA granted her an Honorary Membership Award—the first time that award has been given to a non-Japanese nurse.

And while Virginia has had many unique ministries, one remains particularly meaningful. While in Japan she began teaching a Bible class for a group of high-school girls on Sunday afternoons. "They called themselves the Disciples Bible Class. I taught that group for over seven years, even while I was in Hiroshima, and they have had a great impact on my life.

"Many of the girls who came to that class had never before entered a church or opened a Bible. We started our study with the Gospel of John. It took us more than a year to complete that study, and John has become my favorite book of the Bible.

"I still have contact with over thirty of the approximately seventy girls who came to that class. Most are married now and have grown children and grandchildren; many have visited me in my Chicago home. These are my very special Japanese friends."

No doubt, Virginia has special friends all over the world who have fond memories of her and her contributions. Though never sent by a Christian mission organization, Virginia Ohlson has been God's missionary to Japan, to students throughout the world and to nursing. ■



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