

To bring a small token of my love to Him
Sara Jane Kiper—Missionary to the Japanese
by Dr. Mary L. Kiper Dubler, DVM

My interest in Japan and my Aunt Sarah Jane Kiper's experiences there were renewed in the summer of 1998. Yuko, a young lady from Kobe, Japan stay with us as part of a special program at Colorado State University. We asked a lot of questions about her home country, and our discussions reminded me of seeing dolls, paintings, and other items from Japan in my aunt's apartment in Wheaton, Illinois. I knew that she had been a missionary to Japan, but I did not know any other details. She had died when I was fifteen, and although I had many wonderful memories of her, I really did not know much about her service in Japan. What led her to Japan? When was she there? What was her life like as a missionary? So many questions begged answers.



Sarah Jane Kiper
High School
Graduation Photo

I wrote my Aunt Norma, Sarah Jane's sister, to ask her what she knew. She kindly sent me a packet of information, much of it written by my aunt, as well as several pictures. One picture in particular brought back so many memories. My sister, I and our two cousins were sitting with Aunt Jane on a couch in our grandmother's living room. The date was 1967 and I was 7 years old. We cousins loved Aunt Jane, and I remember that every time she came to visit we were so excited.



Sarah Jane Kiper with
her nieces in 1967

She never married, and during the time I knew her she lived and worked in Wheaton, but would frequently visit her mother, brother, sister and their families in our little town of Chenoa, Illinois. She was a tall woman with dark hair and a very kind, smiling face. She had a wonderful laugh that came easily and she always had time for us little people.

At my confirmation in 1973 she gave me a small white New Testament and wrote in the front, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin. (I John 1:7b) Lovingly, Aunt Jane." That scripture reflected Sarah Jane's deep faith and trust in the Lord Jesus and her desire that all should know Him as savior. Sarah Jane's sister, Norma, said it well in a letter she wrote to me along with the packet of information: *I do know she [Sarah Jane]*

loved her Lord and was very dedicated to Him and she wanted all her family and extended family to know the Lord, too, as well as the rest of the world. Indeed that seems to be what led her to Japan....

The daughter of Hallie and Vanda Kiper, tenant farmers in the small central Illinois town of Chenoa, Sarah Jane gave her heart to Christ at the age of 13. After graduating from high school in 1942, she attended Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago. It was there that she became interested in attending William Carey Missionary Society meetings. The messages challenged her since she had heard few missionary messages in her home church. The Lord began dealing with her during her sophomore year about yielding her life for service in a foreign land. She received her Bachelor of Religious Education degree in 1947. During the next year of graduate work for her Master's degree she heard a missionary speak of the need in Japan for "missionaries to take the gospel where soldiers had taken bombs a few years before" because the gospel changes hearts. She also remembered Douglas MacArthur's plea for missionaries and Bibles in Japan. She was convinced that the Lord wanted her in Japan to help give the gospel to them. She applied to the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society and was accepted in January 1949. She gave her testimony as follows,



I have been saved to tell others of the Christ who died for me. I have never had the deep peace and joy that I now enjoy since I surrendered my personal desires to His one desire for me—giving the Gospel of redemption to those in a far away land who have never heard that Christ came into the world to save them too. My prayer is that I shall be a channel through which His message can flow into the hearts of sinners, who by the power of the Holy Spirit will become saints in His Kingdom. My verse is 'Delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart' (Psalm 37:4). My supreme desire is to bring the 'trophy of grace' to my Master's feet, as a small token of my love to Him for all that He has done for me.

1949 was a very busy year for Sarah Jane as she took an eleven-week course with Wycliffe Bible Translators and also attended Japanese Language and Culture classes for several months at Yale's Institute of Far Eastern Languages. After securing financial and prayer support, Sarah Jane Kiper sailed for Japan from San Francisco and arrived two weeks later on July 10th, 1950. The ship docked in Yokohama Harbor and Sarah Jane was greeted by fellow missionaries. The day was hot, rainy and muggy, but four days later she and several other missionaries were in the cooler climate of the mountains of Karuizawa for Japanese language study at the Tokyo Language School. It was here that she saw the Crown Prince, Akahito, riding his pure white horse while he was vacationing; she was particularly interested in him because they shared the same birthday. Karuizawa was also the place where she experienced her first typhoon—interestingly called Jane and a particularly bad storm—as well as her first earthquake.

In September the language school moved back to Tokyo where Sarah Jane continued her language training until Christmas. She lived in a Japanese-Western type house in the heart of the university area with three to five other missionary women also in language school. She studied

for three hours every morning except Saturday and Sunday, and it took the majority of her time outside of class for her class preparation. She wrote back to her friends in the States,

The language is still quite difficult; especially the writing of the characters, but it is very interesting. Thank you, each one, who is praying for me in regard to the language. I am trusting that the Lord will help me to be able to use the language of the people enough by December to give the Word to those in Yuzawa [her first duty station, 248 miles north of Tokyo] who know nothing about the Lord Jesus who died for them.

With the Lord blessing her diligent work, Sarah Jane was very successful in mastering the difficult Japanese language. By the end of 1951 she was teaching Bible classes, some in English and Japanese, but most of them entirely in Japanese, for all age groups. She also taught Sunday school and even conducted a Japanese church choir for a Christmas concert December 27, 1951.

Sarah Jane did most of her work in Yamagata City in Yamagata Prefecture [181 miles north of Tokyo], being there approximately three and a half years. During that time Sarah Jane and her fellow missionaries were involved in evangelism, teaching Bible classes, helped operate a medical clinic, broadcast radio programs, and taught English. Several young people and adults came to know the Lord and were baptized, and they began the Umetate Bible Baptist Church.



Sarah Jane Kiper taught women's classes in Japanese.
Photo c. 1953

Aunt Sarah Jane went on furlough in June 1955, sailing back to the States on the President Wilson. Though her heart was in Japan and she desired to be a full-time missionary there, medical troubles prevented her from returning. When Aunt Jane learned that the Mission Board would not allow her to return to Japan because of health issues, she was obviously disappointed, however she was able to write the following to the recipients of her prayer letter, dated September 24, 1956:

Soon many ties with you good friends will be discontinued. But, isn't it a wonderful tie that we have in Christ! Because of Him and Calvary we can meet daily before the Throne of God in prayer. We can also meet some day in person before the Throne with the Japanese whom you and I have won to Him as we have served together. God's word assures us of that.

She resigned as a missionary and began working as an administrative secretary for the Conservative Baptist Mission Board in Wheaton, Illinois. She continued to keep in contact with the Japanese believers in Yamagata, often supporting them financially so they could attend Bible school. She was able to make one visit back to her friends in Japan in 1973.

Sarah Jane Kiper died suddenly on November 8, 1975 at the age of 50, but her story really does not end there. The most intriguing writings I found among Aunt Jane's papers were about a man named Hiroshi Suzuki who will be visiting here with his wife in September. Sarah Jane's work continues in his life, and as you can read in the accompanying article, "A gift from our Father: How we met Hiroshi Suzuki and learned of his life work in Japan."