

Memory

By Takashima Hatsuhisa

I've heard an expression in English that goes, "One grows forgetful with age." In actual fact, I cannot help feeling that since reaching the auspicious age of 60 last year I have become quite forgetful myself. Having gone up to the second floor of my house to get my glasses, I turn my attention to something else and then go back downstairs, forgetting all about my glasses and wondering why I went upstairs in the first place. Finally I remember and go back upstairs again. Recently this has happened with unpleasant frequency.

Twenty or thirty years ago when I was an energetic, active broadcast journalist, I always had firmly in mind exactly where each book on my bookshelves at home was located. A number of times, I called home from work and asked my wife to go to a certain section of the bookshelf and from a certain shelf take out, say, the 10th book from the left, which has such and such a title, open the book about a fourth from the front and read to me over the phone what it says. At such times, before making the call, my mind's eye could see the spot on the bookshelf, see the cover of the book, see the book leafing through and know very close to exactly where the desired passage in the book was.

Comparing my memory then with now, I'm even shocked myself. I could rationalize to a certain extent that it's because I now have so many more books that they are doubled up on the shelves, one row in back and one in front, and that is why I can't remember where a particular volume is. But in actual fact, I have become more forget-

ful, to the extent that I worry whether I might eventually forget altogether who I am, where I am and what I'm doing.

At that very juncture, I ran across some astounding news.

when two men in a passing automobile abducted her. Fortunately she was released to her parents unharmed 24 hours later, but she recounted that while she was being held by the criminals, her hands and legs were tied and her eyes and mouth were covered with tape.

Two days later, people were amazed to hear the public announcement of her description of the events to the police. She memorized and described to the police the whole event and her assailants in precise detail from when she was shoved into the car by the kidnapers and taken to an apartment, until she was eventually released in Kuroiso.

She told police that on the day of her release she was put into a car, and that the time it took from the apartment to the Kuroiso-City Cultural Hall, where she was released, was "about half as long as it takes to make a cup of instant noodles." In other words, it took one-and-half or two minutes, so it was possible to assume that the apartment was quite close by. When asked about the apartment building, Miho replied: "It was a two-story

building and it had a reddish-brown stairway on the outside. Under the stairs was a case of beer bottles, and there was a parking lot. While I was blindfolded, I heard some rocket firecrackers nearby. When they gave me snacks to eat and let me go to the toilet, they took off the blindfold and I looked around the room. There were comic books scattered about, a television, a thermos, a clock but no bed."

Describing the culprits, Miho told police: "One looked scary, and it seemed like he was giving orders to the



Photo: THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Akimoto Miho was reunited with her parents 24 hours after she was kidnapped by two men

The memory of a 7-year-old child completely shattered the sinister designs of some adults. The story is connected with a splendid arrest that will be recorded in Japanese criminal history.

The central figure in this drama is Akimoto Miho, a second grader at Higashihara Elementary School in Kuroiso, Tochigi Prefecture. The incident took place before noon on Aug. 14, 2001. Miho and her little sister were playing with water along the street of a residential area of Kuroiso,

other one. The other one seemed kind and nice. He was missing one front tooth, and he had a mole on his neck. I asked him how old he was and he told me he was 21. When they let me go, he gave me some ¥10 coins and told me to use them to make a phone call. He even asked me if I knew how to use a phone." She described both to police with considerable precision.

The detailed evidence given by Miho led to a swift determination of the apartment where she had been held. Police quickly identified Tanaka Kunihiko, the person renting the apartment, and Fujita Ryuichi, Tanaka's classmate during high school, as prime suspects and issued a warrant for their arrest.

When one compares the sketches of the alleged criminals drawn by police on the basis of Miho's description with their actual photographs, one is impressed by how alike they are. While at his parents' home, Tanaka, who was described as kindly and missing a tooth, was asked by his mother, "This sketch is of you, isn't it? It looks just like you." His mother tried to persuade him to turn himself in, but he fled. Three weeks later, however, while he was working at a construction site in another town, a coworker saw the same sketch of the wanted person and reported him to police who arrested him. When Fujita, the scary one who shouted at her not to cry, returned home a week after the crime because he had completely run out of money, his mother showed him the police sketch, talked him into giving himself up and called the police, who came to arrest him.

Concerning why the two abducted Miho – whether it was an attempt to get money – and why they simply released her, the actual facts remain unclear. However, it is obvious that the criminals did not anticipate that their hostage would be a young girl with extreme cleverness and keen memory. When they released her, the pair ordered her to say that she had been abducted by a man and a woman, but they were clearly no match for Miho. "That's what they told me to say, but actually....," she went on to explain, completely destroying their

intended scheme. When it was reported that Kuroiso's Chief of Police commented that the incident was solved within such a short time thanks to Miho's exceptional memory, a number of people contacted her parents and Higashihara Elementary School, where she was enrolled, wanting to know what kind of student she was and what kind of education she had been receiving.

There have been many cases in which crimes have been solved thanks to a child's memory. Two years ago in a kidnapping case in Osaka, a police sketch of the perpetrator was created on the basis of the description given by the 7-year-old girl who was the victim, and this led to the arrest of the culprit. It has been argued in court whether a child's recollections should be admitted as evidence in court proceedings, and in some cases, the court has judged such evidence acceptable and subsequently found the defendant guilty. Following the incident in Kuroiso, newspapers throughout Japan published articles on why it is that children can recall things so vividly and whether the brains of children are different from those of adults. Other articles commented enviously on Miho's ability to recall things. Those articles implicitly spoke of the feelings held by journalists of my age.

According to Professor Takagi Sadayuki of the School of Medicine at Gunma University, who is researching the functions of the human brain, memory is located in the part of the brain known as the temporal lobe. Occasionally, something that has been completely forgotten can be recalled by the application of electrical stimulus, and moreover recalled vividly accompanied by visual image and sound. The human brain develops rapidly from birth to the age of three, then continues to develop until about the age of 20, but from then onward, the neural cells in the brain begin to decrease at the rate of approximately 100,000 per day. As a result, the ability to remember things decreases with age. However, if one makes an effort to come into contact with new information, read and think, thus strengthening the brain's activity,

supplementary neural cells within the brain become active, and it is therefore possible to maintain memory functions, allowing one to somehow keep up with younger people.

Professor Takagi says that the best way to improve the neurological functions of the brain is to read. Moreover, he says that in order to improve the capacity and polish the precision of the brain's functions, it is particularly effective to read and think deeply about the meaning between the lines of classics or philosophical books that have been read throughout the centuries.

While trembling with fear, Miho carefully stored in her mind all that she saw and heard, and by recreating these things in words, she opened the way to the arrest of those responsible. It is hardly possible for someone like me, who has lost neural cells through aging, laziness and consumption of whisky and *sake*, to expect to have the excellent memory that Miho possesses. Perhaps all that is left to do is to follow Professor Takagi's advice concerning reading in order to slow down to some degree the further deterioration of my brain functions, despite the fact that there are a lot of books on my shelves which I acquired but never actually got around to reading.

Upon hearing the news that Miho has returned to school in good spirits after the summer vacation, I went to a nearby Do-It-Yourself shop to buy four sets of big bookshelves in order to sort out the messy collections of hundreds of books that had piled up in various corners of my house. Thanks to the new addition of space, so many missing books have been found from the doubled or even tripled up shelves of my old bookshelves.

Sitting in my small study, I cannot help expecting that these neatly sorted out books will bring back the good memories I used to have 20 or 30 years ago. JTI

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