

George Ohsawa

by Ron Kotsch

"He was a madman...he used to throw the dinner table into the air if the miso soup wasn't right."

"After the war he narrowly escaped being executed by General MacArthur."

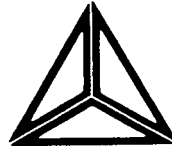
"His students in France were all absolutely terrified of him,...and they still are."

"I understand that he was able to produce gold and other valuable minerals from base elements."

These are the kind of comments one is likely to encounter in a discussion concerning George Ohsawa, the founder of the international Macrobiotic movement. Although Ohsawa died scarcely sixteen years ago in 1966, very few persons in the macrobiotic community in the west, and particularly in the United States ever saw or met him. Consequently, the "oral tradition" of anecdotes about Ohsawa and of statements attributed to him often include much that is only partially true. All of the above statements, for example, contain a germ of truth, but are essentially inaccurate.

Ohsawa's life, however is in no need of elaboration to render it interesting. It is a remarkable story as it stands, replete with adventure, intrigue, love, danger, and of ideals and aspiration pursued with the greatest dedication. Someday perhaps a movie will be made of it, an exciting and inspiring one.

Ohsawa was born as Sakurazawa Jyoichi in Kyoto, Japan on October 18, 1893. His father, a dispossessed samurai soon deserted the family. A few years later, the mother,



overworked and afflicted with tuberculosis, died, so Ohsawa grew up ineffect as an orphan. Although a dedicated student, he had to terminate his education after graduation from a business highschool due to lack of money. When he was about eighteen years old he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis and was given little hope of surviving. He chanced upon a book by a Japanese physician of the late 19th century, named Ishitsuka Sagen. Although Ishitsuka was trained in western medicine, he had developed a diet therapy based on traditional oriental beliefs and practices. He called this **shoku-yo** or "food nourishment," and had attracted a good number of believers and followers who, in 1910, had formed the Shoku-yo society. This shoku-yo approach contained most of the basic ideas with which we now associate macrobiotics: the

importance of food in determining human health; the interrelation of physical, emotional and spiritual health; and the centrality of grains and vegetables as the primary food of man. Young Ohsawa experimented with the diet prescribed by Ishitsuka and succeeded in curing his tuberculosis.

After a varied career in the import-export field as a business man, Ohsawa decided to devote himself entirely to the **shoku-yo** movement. From 1923 to 1929 he worked at the main branch of the organization in Tokyo, serving tirelessly as lecturer, writer, editor and medical consultant. Early in 1929 he embarked for Paris by way to the trans-Siberian railway. He wanted to bring shoku-yo and other aspects of Japanese and Chinese culture to the west. Ohsawa spent the next six years there and was instrumental in introducing judo, Japanese flower arrangement (**kado**), acupuncture and Oriental herbal medicine to western Europe. It was about this time that he began to use the Yin-Yang terminology in conjunction with the food and diet approach of Ishitsuka.

Ohsawa went back to Japan because he saw that his homeland was on a collision course with the western powers. He hoped to help avert this collision, but his worst fears were realized in the destruction and defeat of World War II. During the later stages of conflict, Ohsawa was involved with anti-war activity and with plots for a coup

d'etat against the war government. He was arrested and imprisoned for this. At the close of the conflict, he was still in jail, severely weakened by malnutrition and maltreatment.

After the war Ohsawa worked to make *shoku-yo* (now Macrobiotics) the foundation for the rebuilding of Japan. Also, he tried to introduce a consciousness of food into the World Federalist movement which aimed at establishing a world government. Neither enterprise succeeded. From the late 1940's Ohsawa began to dispatch his students to various parts of the world to spread the gospel of Macrobiotics: Michio Kushi, Aveline Tomoko Yokogawa, Herman and Cornelia Aihara all went to America, Clim Yoshimi to France, Tomio Kikuchi to South America. In 1953 Ohsawa himself left Japan with the avowed purpose of spending the rest of his life traveling the world and spreading the philosophy and practice of Macrobiotics. He went first to India for eighteen months, then to Africa where he had his famous encounter with Dr. Albert Schweitzer and with tropical ulcers.

From his arrival in France after leaving Africa until his sudden death eleven years later, Ohsawa was almost constantly on the move. He divided his time between western Europe, North America, and Japan, spending at most a few months in any place at one time. During this period he became involved with the attempt to synthesize valuable materials out of simple, plentiful elements. He attracted a substantial following in

France, Belgium and America, particularly in New York City. His following included many who had been cured of long standing diseases by Ohsawa and his Macrobiotic regime, and who were thus totally dedicated to this wise man from the East.

These followers were brutally shocked by the news that on April 23, 1966 Ohsawa had died in his apartment in Tokyo, apparently of a sudden heart stoppage. It is conjectured that the paralysis may have been caused by



long dormant, suddenly active parasitic worms contracted during the African sojourn. One young Japanese man who knew Ohsawa at the time recalled to me, "I was so very surprised. Mr. Ohsawa was so strong, even then. I thought that he would live forever." Ohsawa's ashes lie in a simple gravesite on the grounds of a Buddhist temple in Kyoto.

Ohsawa is a fascinating and often paradoxical figure. Through most of his life he ate a very Yang (salty and well cooked) diet and was known for his quick temper and frequent outbursts against his students and others. He was known as well for his great physical and mental energy. Towards the end of his life he was more a kindly grandfather-like figure. He presented

himself to the world as an expert in health and in natural living and yet, he chain-smoked until the day of his death. Ohsawa was intensely aware and proud of his native Japanese culture, yet he was also a man of the world who had visions of a world community of harmony and peace, a world based on the principles and the practice of Macrobiotics.

In one area, however, Ohsawa was absolutely consistent. That was in his complete dedication to macrobiotics and to its spread to all peoples. He never wavered from the principle that "Food is the source of all phenomena. If the food is good (in accordance with the order of the universe) then the phenomena will be good." For Ohsawa, food was the *sine qua non* for the evolution of humanity, in the social, artistic and spiritual realm. Whatever other means we use to affect the improvement of humankind, forgetting the factor of food will doom the attempt to failure. For this simple truth and for its spread to the entire family of humanity, Ohsawa expended his wealth, energy and entire life. It is an example which we should not easily forget.

Note: Ron Kotsch received his Ph.D. from Harvard on "George Ohsawa and the Japanese Religious Tradition." He will be giving a special weekend seminar on the *Life & Thought of George Ohsawa*, on April 17 & 18. This is an excellent opportunity to more fully appreciate and understand the influences of Ohsawa.