

Akiko Yagi (1895-1983)

Nick Heath

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Akiko, or Aki, Yagi was born on September 6th 1895 at Fukushima-cho in the Nagano Prefecture of Japan. She married at the age of twenty-three, to Rokuro Furuyama and after giving birth to a son, Kenichiro, realised that her increasingly radical outlook was at odds with the thinking of her traditional husband. She divorced him at the age of twenty-seven, leaving him and their child.

This kind of behaviour was practically unheard of in Japan in this period. Aki Yagi was later to reminisce that “soon after getting married I realised I’d made a mistake. Our sensibilities were too different...There was the family, the household, but no human beings, and there were so many attendant things that I couldn’t stand...I have no regrets about my past life but that was hard to bear. For a woman to abandon her child at that time in Japan was practically unheard of. Divorce was just like suicide in those days”.

Aki then worked as a primary school teacher and started writing as a reporter for Nichinichi Shimbun, a Tokyo daily newspaper. She also wrote for a children’s magazine edited by Mimei Ogawa. She became involved in educational courses for workers and trade union activities and was at first attracted to the Marxist movement. She learned about anarchism at the Labour Academy, and then met the anarchist Akira Miyazaki (1889-1977) and became an anarchist herself.

In 1928 she became a contributor and member of the editorial staff of Nyonin Geijutsu (Women’s Arts) which first appeared in July 1928 and ended in June 1932. It was edited by Shigure Hasegawa, and Aki Yagi provided reviews and novels to the magazine. This magazine concentrated on both women’s liberation and women’s art and literary efforts. It was a highly influential magazine and soon began to publish proletarian fiction. It was leaning to socialism, and published reports on the Soviet Union. It had a broad approach, including writers like the Marxist Yukiko Nakashima, as well as Akiko Yagi, now within the anarchist orbit, and other anarchists like Yuriko Mochizuki.

It was Aki Yagi who fired the first round in the Ana- Boru (Anarchist-Bolshevik) debate which reverberated through many magazines of the period. Women’s Arts initiated the debate in its pages from July 1929 to January 1930. Yagi’s Open Letter to Shigeyoshi Fujimori initiated the debate. Other anarchist women who joined in the debate were Itsue Takamura, Masae Matsumoto, and Yuriko Mochizuki. In February 1930, these were the founding members of the group - Proletarian Women Artists’ League (Musen Fujin Geijutsu Renmei) which put out the anarchist fem-

inist Fujin Sensen (Women's Front), edited by Takamura. Others who contributed were Shizuka Jo and Raicho Hiratsuka.

The magazine was not afraid to criticise male anarchists, and Matsumoto in particular criticised Kropotkin and Bakunin over attitudes towards women, and had no time at all for Proudhon. The magazine also dealt with the problems of birth control, sexual relations, critiques of the traditional family and what to replace it with. The government eventually forced the closure of Fujin Sensen in 1931.

Aki Yagi also contributed to the anarchist magazine Kokushoku Shimba (Black Front) along with others like Ono Tozaburo (see his biography here at libcom) and Akiyama Kiyoshi.

Together with her lover Miyazaki Akira, Suzuki Yasuyuki and others she was a founder of Noson Seishsha (Society of the Rural Youth) in February 1931. The history of this anarchist communist rural association can be read in Philippe Pelletier's article Anarcho-syndicalism in Japan: 1911 to 1934 here at libcom. She was noted for her opposition to the founding of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo on 1st March 1932, which she described as a slave state in the pages of the association's paper Noson Seinen, and called for opposition to imperialism.

Aki Yagi was arrested over charges that she was involved in thefts to fund the Noson Seishsha and four years later at the Noson Seishsha trial in 1935 she was sentenced to 2 years and 6 months in prison for violating the Security Act.

After the end of her sentence, Aki Yagi moved to Manchuria and worked as a clerk at the Mantetsu (South Manchuria Railway Company) at the Shinkyo branch. In Shinkyo, Yagi established a close friendship with Nobuko Nakashima, a feminist and Communist Party member, whom she had first met in Tokyo in 1925 and also associated with other political exiles like the anarchist Ikumasa Funaki (real name Nobori, born 1912) who had been arrested for anarchist publishing activities in Japan. Towards the end of the World War, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria in 1945 and Aki Yagi was forced to move back to Japan. Her old friend Nakashima was gang raped by Red Army soldiers and then committed suicide. The news of this left a lasting impression on Yagi.

There she acted as a matron of a children's dormitory for the factory of a relative in Shinsu. She did not re-engage in activity with the anarchist movement in any significant way. About this time her only son, Kenichiro, from whom she was separated, died. She then moved to Tokyo and became a matron of a dormitory. She founded the Mother and Child Rehabilitation Association. She retired in 1962 following the reorganisation of mother and child dormitories.

From 1967 she lived in a tiny apartment in Kiyose, Tokyo, for ten years. In December 1976, against her will, she entered a nursing home but eventually returned to live with relations. This allowed her to issue 15 issues of a personal newsletter Harakuna and to write three volumes of memoirs.

She died on April 30th 1983 at the age of eighty-seven. At a funeral, an old comrade from Noson Seishsha, Junji Hoshino, paid tribute to her.

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A short biography of Japanese anarchist and feminist Aki Yagi

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