

**The Fringes of the Faith:
Abraham Kotsuji, Bernard Geis, and a Judaism of the Japanese Mind**

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Abstract

Abraham Setsuzō Kotsuji (1899-1973), a scholar of biblical texts, is best known for securing the safety of Jewish refugees in Japan and its occupied territories during the Second World War. Kotsuji recounts his own spiritual journey, and eventual conversion to Judaism, in his 1964 publication, *From Tokyo to Jerusalem: The Autobiography of a Japanese Convert to Judaism*. Kotsuji's book was published by Bernard J. Geis (1909-2001), a Jewish man and lifelong American urbanite who was best known for publishing popular works with little intellectual or political substance. Despite the stark differences in their respective backgrounds and professional ambitions, the journeys of Kotsuji and Geis were to become inextricably linked. The present article focuses on the trajectory of Kotsuji's path to Geis, the political, social, and spiritual events that marked pivotal moments within Kotsuji's journey, and ultimately, the ways in which Kotsuji's journey of faith shaped his own vision for postwar Japan. While this article underscores Kotsuji's eventual partnership with Geis, the relationships that led to and enabled this partnership are no less crucial to Kotsuji's legacy and his evolving vision. These include Kotsuji's cooperation with Matsuoka Yōsuke, the president of the South Manchuria Railway Company (SMRC), Israel Ben-Zeev, the president of the World Union for the Propagation of Judaism, and Prince Mikasa, the younger brother of Emperor Hirohito.

Keywords: Japan, conversion, Abraham Kotsuji, Bernard Geis

I. Introduction

Confucius was said to have pontificated about the stages of life, noting that, at the age of 60, man was finally able to hear universal truth. For Kotsuji Setsuzō, a descendant of Shinto priests and a scholar of biblical texts, this meant taking to 'his heart the God of the Old Testament'. And it was at the age of 60 that Kotsuji marked his identity as Abraham ben Abraham Kotsuji with a *brit milah*, a ritual circumcision that is typically performed on the eighth day of life (*Analects of Confucius* 2.4; Kotsuji 1964, i, 212).¹

Kotsuji recounts his personal journey in his 1964 publication, *From Tokyo to Jerusalem: The Autobiography of a Japanese Convert to Judaism*. Kotsuji's book was published by Bernard J. Geis (1909-2001), a Jewish man and lifelong American urbanite whose own religious background was



secondary to his pursuit of success in the publishing world.² Known best for publishing popular and salacious works with little intellectual value or political substance, Geis's support of Kotsuji's serious scholarship is especially surprising. Despite the stark differences in their respective backgrounds and professional ambitions, the journeys of Kotsuji and Geis were to become inextricably tied to one another, as well as to the very essence of Jews as the people of *a* book, if not necessarily *the* book.

The present article focuses on the trajectory of Kotsuji's path to Geis, the political, social, and spiritual events that marked pivotal moments within Kotsuji's journey, and ultimately, the ways in which Kotsuji's journey of faith shaped his own vision for postwar Japan. While this article underscores Kotsuji's eventual partnership with Geis, the relationships that led to and enabled this partnership are no less crucial to Kotsuji's legacy and his evolving vision. These include Kotsuji's cooperation with Matsuoka Yōsuke, the president of the South Manchuria Railway Company (SMRC), Israel Ben-Zeev, the president of the World Union for the Propagation of Judaism, and Prince Mikasa, the younger brother of Emperor Hirohito. While Kotsuji's work within Asia's Jewish community during Word War Two has been briefly touched upon in critical and popular literature,³ the social and political import of Kotsuji's life after his conversion to Judaism, and his unusual but productive relationship to Geis, remain unexplored.

II. Fits and starts: from Tokyo to Manchuria

What makes Kotsuji's journey in faith unique and interesting is its fits and starts. After Kotsuji graduated from American Presbyterian College of Meiji Gakuin in Tokyo in 1923, he travelled to Hokkaido to minister to a small congregation of Ainu converts.⁴ There, he realised his role was little more than 'part-time entertainer', less able to lead *by* example than *as* example, less able to commit himself to the life of the mind than the life of the party.⁵

Disheartened by the stifling anti-intellectual atmosphere he found in the north, he tried again in Gifu, closer to his hometown of Kyoto, and a centre of Buddhist philosophical life. Yet, here, too, he felt stifled, not only by the vagaries of the Nicene Creed, but also by his inutility in service of the people (Kotsuji 1964, 84, 95-6, 100; Hirose 2017, 9-20, 13; Kotsuji 1964, 103, 106-7, 113). Realizing that his heart lay with the Old Testament, not the Gospel, Kotsuji, supported by his wife's finances and sacrifices, pursued study at Auburn Theological Seminary in upstate New York, followed by the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, leaving upon completion of his doctorate in 1931 a bona fide scholar and 'a Jew more than a Christian' (Kotsuji 1931; 1964, 121, 123, 129-130).

As scholars debate and discuss, so too do they understand the necessity of the production of a body of work, a testament of their ideas and analysis. For Kotsuji, his dissertation, 'The Origin and Evolution of the Semitic Alphabets', could serve as the basis of that testament, as could his work in Japanese on a

Hebrew grammar, to which he dedicated his time upon his return to Japan (Kotsuji 1931, 1937, 1941). But, as he recalled, he needed students, not solely in order to spread and develop his ideas, but also to provide him with an income, and while he would have longed to be offered ‘a lectureship in Semitics,... there was no such thing offered at any Japanese university’ (Kotsuji 1964, 129). So Kotsuji would instead carve out his own niche, establishing his own school, ‘an Institute of Hebrew Studies’, where he could have full control of the curriculum. With the assistance of ‘a few friends’, only one of whom he names—Mr. Auler, ‘a broad-minded and sympathetic man who had charge of the Bible House on the Ginza’—he opened the Institute of Biblical Research in Tokyo on 1 October 1934.

After a few years, however, the influence of Japanese Christians, politicians, and academics, whom he again does not name, forced the discontinuation of his institute, a period contemporaneous with the period between the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 and the signing of the Tripartite Pact in 1940 (Kotsuji 1964, 137-140). Even as ties between Germany and Japan were shaky until formalised with the latter alliance, these events would eventually propel Kotsuji from whatever remained of his ivory tower—he rightfully feared his potential persecution as a Jewish sympathiser, as Nazi antisemitism had begun to permeate Japan’s traditional borders as well as its holdings within the Asian mainland, particularly in Manchuria, which it had occupied in 1931.

Manchuria was in a unique position within the expanding Japanese empire. Expanding off the Korean peninsula, providing a foothold in the young and fractured Republic of China, a bulwark against the Soviet Union, Manchuria offered Japan a vantage point on the mainland from which to launch the land assault of China and points south. It was also one of the most international regions of the empire, home to many ethnicities, nationalities, and faiths, including most of China’s Jewish community outside of Shanghai and, though a British colony at the time, Hong Kong (Kotsuji 1964, 186).

Yet, because many of the region’s residents were antagonistic to the Japanese encroachment, men at the forefront of that encroachment, particularly within industry and transportation, hoped to find inroads to overtures of amity, if for no other reason than savvy business practices. As Colonel Yasue Norihiro, chief of the Army Special Service in Dairen, wrote to Japan’s Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Army, and Navy on 19 September 1938, the Jewish community in Harbin could prove an ally in an otherwise hostile state in Manchuria, if the Japanese could play upon the antipathy for Russian antisemitism, merging it with the Japanese government’s hostility to the Soviet Union (Kranzler 1971, 455).⁶ If Japan could be shown as a protector of the Jews, and able to fulfill the promises of Zionism in a way that the Euro-American powers could not, Yasue was convinced that the best solution for both the Jewish community in Harbin and for Manchuria as a whole was to ‘take hold of this peculiar nation.... build up their community,

have them registered and guide them under our control'. He was hardly alone in his beliefs, and other government men on the mainland agreed. It was due to such a man that Kotsuji's next adventure began just as he was facing unemployment (Kranzler 1971, 455-459; Fujiwara 2000, 98).

With its proximity to Russia, Manchuria in the late nineteenth century, despite its inclusion in the Chinese sphere for centuries, had been a safe haven for Jews seeking to escape the Pale of Settlement, although its Jewish population was already in decline by the start of the Pacific War. Manchuria had been permitted by the Tsar to establish Russian bases outside of Vladivostok, particularly during the construction of the Trans-Manchurian and Chinese Eastern Railways. With a job offer from Matsuoka Yōsuke, the president of the South Manchuria Railway Company (SMRC), Kotsuji was in a unique position to command Japanese policy in a way most scholars of biblical texts were not. This task had never occurred to him prior, dedicated, as he was, to academia, not activism. However, Matsuoka, convinced that Kotsuji would be the best candidate to interface with the Jewish community in the colony, paid an exorbitant salary to acquire him, as Japan suddenly had to distinguish between Jews and Gentiles in a very real and unprecedented way (Fogel 2023, 228-9; Kotsuji 1964, 144).

Matsuoka himself was a personality whose life and legacy, though subject to far more study than Kotsuji's, remain a topic of debate. Matsuoka's tenure as president of the SMRC was both tumultuous and short-lived, as he drifted from politics to business and back, often due to circumstances for which, rightly or not, he would bear the blame (Dickinson 2004, 170; "Matsuoka Asserts Policy to be Firm", 1940; Tokayer and Swartz 2004, 143). Certainly, the taint of his postwar charges, which placed him among Japan's war criminals, coloured his legacy, but Kotsuji insisted that his former employer was both 'a badly understood' and 'basically a good-hearted man' ("Yosuke Matsuoka Dies in Tokyo at 66", 1946; Kotsuji 1964, 147). Kotsuji's Matsuoka held enmity for Communists, not Jews, with one Jewish industrialist in Manchuria recalling that Matsuoka privately informed him that while Matsuoka openly admitted to promoting 'a treaty with Hitler', the Japanese politician was quick to point out that 'I never promised him to be an antisemite [sic]'. On the contrary, according to Kotsuji, Matsuoka 'was eager to win the Jewish people over to the Japanese viewpoint' (Tokayer and Swartz 2004, 127; Kranzler 1971, 35; Kotsuji 1964, 149).

Supporting Japanese industry and empire in Harbin was not necessarily as hard a sell to the city's Jewish community as might be supposed initially. Several leading figures among Manchuria's Jewish community were eager to find allies against the pogroms that continued even as the tsarist regime fell. Truthfully, even beyond the Soviet sphere, alliances with Jewish communities, let alone stateless communities, were hardly plentiful in the late 1930s. If Kotsuji could foster friendship between the two communities, Japanese and Jewish, even if only for each to use the other for their needs, this was a task

he was willing to undertake. So, as much as Japanese authorities could be dismissed as, in the words of one academic, ‘playing the Jewish card’, so too might some in the Jewish community in Manchuria have looked to the ‘Japanese card’ (Fogel 2023, 243; Ben-Canaan 2007; Maruyama Naoki 1986, 20; Bowman 2005, 42; Takao 2015, 43-45).

Both communities would end up disappointed, as would their champion, Kotsuji. It had been hoped that Jewish funds, connections—including to the US president, FDR, whose Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., was Jewish—, and goodwill would benefit the Japanese, particularly as the war continued and, in doing so, rapidly turned against Japan. Japanese hopes were dashed. Jewish hopes fared slightly better, since some members of the community managed to escape bloodshed in both Europe and Asia. Still, for Kotsuji, the time in Manchuria was not without its victories, small though they may have been. First, Kotsuji had finally seen the doctrine that enraptured him as a religion animated and practised daily within a living Jewish community. When Kotsuji eventually returned to the Japanese mainland, he claimed that he ‘had finally come to be familiar with the Jewish people, to make friends with them, to understand their ways’. He was ‘closer than ever to Judaism’ (Kranzler 1976, 334-5; Kotsuji 1964, 157).

Further, once Kotsuji arrived home, he called upon his own champion, Matsuoka, now back in politics as Foreign Minister, to provide sanctuary to his new community on the Japanese archipelago itself. While Matsuoka could do nothing in his official capacity to guarantee either the passage or safety of Jewish refugees, he assured Kotsuji that the issue of refugees would be left to the local and prefectural governments, that ‘the (foreign) ministry will look the other way’, and that ‘the central government in Tokyo simply will ignore whatever action the local government takes’ (Schwarcz 2018, 64-65; Fogel 2023, 247-8; Kotsuji 1964, 157, 162-163). With funding from his wife’s family, Kotsuji claimed that he was able to secure safe passage of ‘nearly 5,000 refugees’ before the end of 1941, mostly through Kobe, either to points east or back to Shanghai (Miyata 2023; Kotsuji 1964, 164, 166).

III. Kotsuji in Israel

As Japanese involvement in the war deepened, Kotsuji was no longer able to deliver Jewish refugees to safety. Nevertheless, Kotsuji still sought to combat the rising antisemitism within his homeland, sending a manuscript entitled *The True Character of the Jewish Nation* to the Meguro Publishing Company (Kotsuji, 1943). A thorough deconstruction of Hitler’s antisemitic rhetoric alongside a history of Judaism and Jews, as people, faith, and culture, his publisher advised him to submit an expurgated work that would allow for publication and for Kotsuji’s continued freedom, removing any sections that might cast aspersions on Japan’s allies in the Tripartite Pact, Germany and Italy. The former would be clear, but the latter, Kotsuji notes, would be hurt, according to the censorship office, by ‘the indisputable statement that the

Romans were responsible for the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD'. While Kotsuji deemed the eventual publication of the work both 'an immediate success' and 'a considerable success', so too did he note that its publication merited him attention (and eventual torture) from the *kempeitai* [police], who deemed him a mere propagandist, paid off by his subjects.⁷ Once again, he saw this experience as solidifying his connection to Judaism. Though his physical ordeal was limited, and his interrogation was cut short by the arrival of a colonel with whom Kotsuji was friendly, the incident proved seminal:

I had read many times of the massacres of millions of Jews during the Middle Ages by the Crusaders, during the Inquisition, and by other groups and peoples. It had always seemed a horror to me; but after my own small ordeal, the persecution of the Jews over the centuries had a reality for me it had lacked before. I now knew what persecution was, and I had discovered that in the face of torture, I could not abandon my belief in the One God as my Lord and citadel. I felt closer than ever to the persecuted people of Israel. I knew that some day I would become a Jew. (Kotsuji 1964, 174-176, 180-183)

Once again, he left the Japanese mainland for Harbin, only to return after the defeat. With his abilities in English, Kotsuji was able to obtain positions in postwar Japan working for the Americans, either through positions with NGOs like the Red Cross or through advisory work with the military, all of which played a secondary role to his continued work in Hebrew and Judaic studies. As such, his conversion seemed, to him, the logical culmination of a lifelong teleological journey. Given his faith and practice, it seemed to Kotsuji 'only natural' to finally become a Jew.

To do so required acceptance among his Jewish brethren, who remained 'divided on the question of converts'. For this reason, among others, Kotsuji desired to make *aliyah* [go to Jerusalem], to convert as completely as possible, including circumcision. In 1957, Kotsuji noted, he received a letter from Dr. Israel Ben-Zeev (né Wolfensohn), president of the World Union for the Propagation of Judaism, offering any assistance in facilitating Kotsuji's conversion in Jerusalem (Kotsuji 1964, 204-6).

As a faith, albeit a multifaceted one, Judaism tends to actively discourage proselytism. Kotsuji knew this; indeed, the fact that he feared his reception by other Jews clearly indicates a somewhat hazy relationship between the faith and conversion. Certainly, converts were welcomed in the faith; the story of Ruth in the Tanakh lauds Ruth's devotion to the faith and to her community, such that she is considered a woman of valour, and elevated among the matriachs of Judaism. Nevertheless, her conversion, and conversions considered kosher by the majority of practising Jews accepting of converts, are those that emphasise the convert's free will in the process. That her conversion is done of and by her own volition, even as her mother-in-law (begrudgingly) agrees to assist her, is paramount. Her dedication to continuing the process even after the death of her Israelite husband solidifies her resolve rather than undermining it. It is not merely an old joke that a

Gentile who seeks to convert will be actively discouraged by the Jews they beseech, and instead be encouraged to consider mental help (Babylonian Talmud *Yevamot* 47a; Berger 2008, 1).

Kotsuji also related how his Jewish friends advised against conversion. Kotsuji's position as an ally, advocate, and tzaddik was already sealed. Decades after the war, long after Kotsuji's death, his legacy was recalled even as his name was forgotten by so many of the individuals he saved. In one such interview, stored in The National Library of Israel, an old woman recollected how her family's travel visas from Russia to Japan were secured by a Japanese man whose name she forgot but who was 'very pro-Jewishly oriented' and whose own conversion he later documented in his autobiography, whose name she did recall (correctly) (H.G. interview, Kestenberg Archive 1989). Similarly, the Chinese historian Vera Schwarcz capped off her illustrious academic career relaying the life story of Chaya Leah Small (née Walkin), another young refugee saved by Kotsuji (Schwarcz 2018, viii, 62, 64). Once again, his name is misremembered, as Schwarcz refers to him as Kotsuji Setsuko, not Setsuzo. Similarly, in another work mentioning his work on behalf of Jewish refugees, this one by Japanese historian Meron Medzini, he is repeatedly deemed Kotsuji Tetsuzo. Yet, even Kotsuji would acknowledge that the legacy of his name is less important than the legacy of his works (Schwarcz 2018, viii, 62, 64; Medzini 2016, 122, 232).

His was, truly, a circuitous path, but the nature of his life to conversion has remained little studied, despite the fact that both his lifework and ultimate faith were fairly unique among Japanese people. He is often compared to Sugihara Chiune, whose acts in Lithuania, particularly obtaining visas for Jews to escape Europe, have been far better researched and eulogised. Neither Sugihara nor Kotsuji were alone in the work of refugee resettlement. From the start of 1940 until the Pacific War, over 1,500 Jews escaped to points east, granted escape by Japanese authorities (Sakamoto 1998, 4; Kowner 2023, 214-5). Nevertheless, no other Japanese official working under any auspices to assist the Jewish community converted to the faith of their beneficiaries. Kotsuji's was a unique tale within both Japan and Judaism. Even beyond his wartime efforts, a Japanese Jew was noteworthy, but one who had no marital ties to the community was unheard of. Nevertheless, Kotsuji's story remained minimally remembered outside of his beneficiaries, even when his name was recalled (Yamada 2013, 30).

But his story could be a powerful and compelling narrative. And here is where both Ben-Zeev and Geis were equally savvy, to say nothing of Kotsuji himself. Once again, faced with economic barriers, Kotsuji's wife offered assistance, suggesting mortgaging their home to finance his trip: "Life is short," she said. "When you want something, you should have it, regardless of the criticism of friends." Kotsuji's spouse, ever the supportive wife, became the keystone in his plan, and not merely economically once more: 'she knew that conversion was my destiny, and she was my support' (Kotsuji

1964, 207). And what of the encouragement of his friends? ‘*Agudah Lema’an Gerei Zedek* (World Union for the Propagation of Judaism) was eager to facilitate my conversion’, but apparently only once Kotsuji landed in Israel.

Ben-Zeev, then, was an interesting individual, as is the organisation he led. Both were focused on spreading the faith, joining a handful of similar groups and their leaders in the United States. As with their American counterparts, the World Union and its director ran up against considerable criticism among Jews, including prominent religious leaders, but unlike the American organisations, Ben-Zeev’s faced political opprobrium as an Israeli organisation headed by the government official serving as the ‘superintendent of high schools in charge of Arabic studies’. Yaakov Shimon, a senior diplomat in the Israeli Foreign Ministry, and Golda Meir, Foreign Minister and future Prime Minister, both expressed their ire at Ben-Zeev’s work, noting that any proselytising activity coming from Israel would be mistaken as political, and that Ben-Zeev’s notion that Jews ‘were obliged to bring the name of God to Asia’ was exceedingly problematic (“Seeks Union of all Jewish Missionary Movements”, 1962; Schichor 2016, 21).

For Kotsuji to fall into the organisation’s lap was no small feat. Certainly, Kotsuji had acquired a number of friends from Harbin and Kobe who had preceded him to Israel—the final destination of their long journey—, but his four-month long excursion served Ben-Zeev’s purposes too. Kotsuji became not merely another convert or *oleh* [someone who fulfills *aliyah*], but the ‘famous scholar from Japan now visiting in Jerusalem’, the ambassador between ancient lands and of cultural connections, always up for impromptu speeches about how he was excited to embrace his role as ‘the tie that binds [Japan and Israel] together’ (Kotsuji 1964, 209-210).

When, a month after his arrival, Kotsuji finally went to the rabbinic court to begin his conversion, his ‘real business in Israel’, he had already met with politicians, physicians, academics, and clergy across the country. Still, here was the moment of truth: why, they asked him, did he ‘choose to believe in Judaism’? His answer evidently satisfied: ‘My entire past life answers that question ... When there is no God but one, what could I believe otherwise than that the Lord our God is that One?’ The only other question that Kotsuji reported from this 30-minute interview was about his spouse, who presumably remained a Christian. Nevertheless, as Kotsuji explained, ‘in Japan, what the husband decides, the wife follows’. A week and a half later, Kotsuji was at the hospital for his ritual circumcision (Kotsuji 1964, 211).

IV. Mission in Japan

Abraham Kotsuji’s conversion made some headlines in the Jewish world, in part because Ben-Zeev ensured that it would. *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle* of Milwaukee provided a small blurb about the event, sure to include not only the World Union for the Propagation of Judaism’s sponsorship, but also two key points about Kotsuji: firstly, that he had taught Hebrew to the Emperor

Hirohito's younger brother, and secondly, that the former intended to 'set up a center under the auspices of the Union' upon his return to Japan ("Japanese Scholar is Circumcised; Becomes a Jew", 1959).

Hirohito's youngest brother, Takahito, known more formally as Prince Mikasa, was an equally interesting individual and not the least because of the attention he drew from a variety of notable Jewish figures post war. In one such instance, Israel Goldstein, rabbi, academic, and one of the founders of Brandeis University, met the prince during a speaking tour in Japan, around the time that Kotsuji was touring Israel. The prince's knowledge and familiarity with Judaism and Jewish history astounded the rabbi, as did his antipathy for the trappings of monarchy. Mikasa's experience during the war, posted anonymously in Nanjing for a year from 1943, had caused him to break from his family's policies and ideologies, and he welcomed Japan's defeat and its subsequent reshaping at the hands of the American occupation as a release 'from the extremely unnatural Imperial system—or a "prison without bars"' (Goldstein 1984, 15; "Prince Mikasa pursued peace through study after shock of WWII experience", 2016).

Dedicated to dismantling the ideologies that fed into Japan's ultranationalism, Mikasa turned to studying history to see Japan's past through analytical eyes. The study of history also led him to study Judaism. According to Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, reporting on a talk Mikasa gave to a Hannukah celebration in Tokyo, Mikasa lauded the Jews as 'the key to Western civilization', and to his own self-awareness:

History has brought him—Prince Mikasa—to the Jew, he said, and Judaism had brought him back to himself. For the Jew is not only the father of the West, he is the scion of the Orient. He is the holy bridge (a traditional and poignant Japanese symbol) between East and West. Through understanding Judaism the Prince regained a sense of his dignity as a member of his people; he was again proud to be Japanese.... The only hope for the Japanese was to learn from the Jews how to draw meaning out of their trials. (Maruyama Masao 1963, 2; Wolf 1953)

Kotsuji was not alone among Japanese semitophiles in his desire to set up a centre for Jewish study. As Wolf recounts, Mikasa 'pleaded for an Imperial Institute of Jewish Studies in Tokyo, presumably financed by Jewish supporters. He said that only an understanding of Judaism rooted in scholarly research would be of value. He offered himself as a student in that Institute' (Wolf 1953). Kotsuji's centre, although also potentially funded by interested parties among the Jewish community, was not necessarily limited to academic scholarship (Wolf 1953).⁸ Kotsuji maintained that his conversion was the culmination of 47 years of seeking; his entire life from what would have been his bar mitzvah was spent striving in the search for meaning and identity. Having studied, albeit rather informally at the feet of Kotsuji, Prince Mikasa would have been a phenomenal testament to Kotsuji's evangelical prowess. Indeed, even a few years prior, when Wolf was impressed by Kotsuji's pupil, Prince Mikasa, Wolf noted that

Professor Kotsuji comes to all of our holiday services in the navy chapel but, despite a knowledge of Hebrew and Judaism equal to that of any of us, he has never pretended to be closer than a friend—in which he is unlike other and less learned Japanese nowadays, who declare themselves to be Jews, half-Jews, or would-be Jews, though only a handful of them have actually been converted. (Wolf 1953)

For Kotsuji, and perhaps even Wolf, then, here was the true means to bridge that gap. Had Prince Mikasa been that bridge, all the better. Never mind that he ultimately failed to follow his mentor to conversion. Reporting his conversion, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) noted that Kotsuji was eager to establish a new centre, backed by the World Union for the Propagation of Judaism. The following year, the JTA announced the foundation of the Institute for Hebrew Culture in Tokyo, backed by ‘a national committee, composed of leaders in the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform branches of American Judaism’. Through this, Kotsuji sought to marry funding for a new iteration of his work—spreading study and the word of the Torah—with those Japanese scholars interested as he had been (“Japanese Scholar Undergoes Circumcision in Israel; Becomes a Jew”, 1959; “U.S. Jews Form Committee to Disseminate Hebrew Culture in Japan”, 1960; Wakamatsu 2014, 42; “Dr. Kotsuji Japanese Hebrew Scholar Who Became Jewish”, 1973).

However the bill was footed and on whichever side of the Pacific hardly mattered, as the World Union and its American counterparts, including the Jewish Information Society, saw in Abraham Kotsuji the very embodiment of their mission. After his conversion, Kotsuji was sponsored on repeated speaking tours, well attended ‘because of the great interest among American Jews in the question of conversion’. He acted for the very organisations under whose auspices he was set on establishing his new Japanese centre (“Seeks Union of all Jewish Missionary Movements”, 1962; Kotsuji 1964, 213-4). This conglomerate, with Kotsuji as figurehead, was the fulfillment of Ben-Zeev’s dictate of proselytising in Asia. After all, Kotsuji had noted in an interview with *Time*, ‘The Japanese are ripe for conversion. Eventually, they will become either Christians or Jews. But as long as Hiroshima is still fresh in their minds, they are not likely to accept Christianity’. In the same article, Kotsuji remarks that Shinto could provide a stepping-stone to conversion, though he granted that it ‘falls far short of attaining the Jewish ideals of monotheism and cleanliness’. With his circumcision and ritual ablution in the *mikveh*, presumably fulfilling cleanliness in the name of monotheism, and not solely as a figurehead, Kotsuji was the man to evangelise Japan for Judaism, a Jew, as one rabbi proclaimed him, in ‘all its rights and all its troubles’ (“Seeks Union of all Jewish Missionary Movements”, 1962; “Religion: Japanese Jew”, 1959).

These rights or troubles thus included Kotsuji’s mission ‘to disseminate the Jewish faith in Japan’. In so doing, he believed himself

tasked with a corollary mission ‘to inaugurate a new branch in the stream of Jewish history[,]... a source in Japan from which a new river of Judaism may one day flow’. Like his royal student, Kotsuji’s use of history to forge new Japanese futures through Judaism—and, for the teacher at least, vice versa—seemed to some as welcome. Kotsuji recounted to Goldstein that his family became much vaunted in Japan while he was being equally celebrated in Israel, as their trailblazing was ‘greatly honored’ (Kotsuji 1964, 214; Goldstein 1984, 83). The concept of being a pioneer was key. Christianity, Kotsuji’s original conversion, had made inroads into Japan, limited though they were, but Judaism was an untrod path. Kotsuji made sure to pay homage to this reality in his chosen Jewish name—Abraham was, after all, the first Jew.⁹ Whether the notion of trailblazing extended beyond Kotsuji’s perception is less significant, but certainly the notion of forging a new path was necessary to the mission. As such, the Judaism of Kotsuji’s institute would not be merely ‘Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform’; it ‘will not be described as any of the three: It will be a genuine living Judaism, which will take into consideration the special nature of the Japanese mind’. This new and living faith would undoubtedly include the missionising work that Kotsuji was aware was seen as suspect at best within the religion. When his Jewish friends inquired about his ‘approach to missionary work’, he concurred that the ‘coercive type of missionary work practised by some Christians’ should rightly be inhibited. However, he demurred, ‘we Jewish people should not neglect to glorify the Great Name of the Lord among other peoples’. Thus, what Kotsuji intended ‘is simply to spread knowledge of Judaism throughout Japan’ (Kotsuji 1964, 214-215). His methodology was threefold: first, establishing a Tokyo-based ‘Jewish library’; second, ‘to publish in Japanese as much and as often as I can on the subject of Judaism and Jewish history’; third, ‘to lecture continually’. All of these were ‘to glorify God’ and use ‘the power of truth to convince’. He recognised that it would be a slow process but was content to ‘simply give them truth; and perhaps in a century’s time, that truth will spread itself’ (Kotsuji 1964, 215).

V. From Tokyo to Jerusalem: the legacy of Kotsuji and Geis

As noted above, in 1964 Bernard Geis published Kotsuji’s autobiography, a work unlike any with which either man had previously been associated. Geis had entered the industry as an advertising executive who pushed the publication of Art Linkletter’s first book, *Kids Say the Darndest Things*, taken from a segment on the latter’s daytime television show. As a publishing house, Bernard Geis Associates, known, not surprisingly, for its strong (and strongarmed) marketing, would introduce celebrity works and the more salacious fare of the day. Kotsuji’s book came out between the publisher’s best-sellers, *Sex and the Single Girl* and *The Valley of the Dolls* (Atlas 2001,

15). Geis also secured a hefty contract with the priest, sociologist, and novelist Fr. Andrew Greeley, whose titillating novels included *The Cardinal Sins* and *Thy Brother's Wife* (McDowell 1982, 11; Greeley 1981, 1982). In 1967, Geis and his eponymous publishing house would be sued by Time Inc. over fair usage of the Zapruder Tapes of the Kennedy Assassination (Wrong 2003, 78-82).¹⁰

Why, then, did Geis publish Kotsuji's book? Kotsuji's work was not erotic, nor was it particularly salacious. Further, we cannot attribute the offer of publication to Kotsuji's renown, as he was virtually unheard of in America. And while he had meaningful encounters and exchanges with Japanese royalty and Jewish religious leaders in Israel, Kotsuji's reputation in both his native and spiritual homelands remained negligible. But Kotsuji's prosaic account of his own spiritual journey—first through Christianity, and then Judaism—did have the advantage of true novelty, and would prove to be shocking to some and iconoclastic to others. The novelty, however, did not reside in the mere fact of Kotsuji's conversion—Japanese conversions, at least to Christianity, had been common since the early Meiji era, with accounts beginning even before the lifting of Japan's ban on Christianity in 1873. Among converts, it was also common to adopt a syncretic and utilitarian variation of Christianity, and so it is hardly surprising that Kotsuji called his Christianity a 'new religion [that] was, in some respects, a kind of religion of my own invention' (Kotsuji 1964, 47, 68).

Still, both men saw themselves as pioneers and viewed their faith, at least in part, as utilitarian. Geis, whose eponymous publishing house was most assuredly not religious, used their shared faith to court Kotsuji, inviting him to join the family for Shabbat dinner. Kotsuji, similarly, used his position as a unique Jew to court his coreligionists in America and Israel into assisting him in his attempts to 'found a Jewish mission in Japan'. While previous work on Kotsuji has taken his autobiography at face value, or as a testament to his wartime work, without considering Geis and the rationale and aftermath of the publication, they have missed the opportunity to explore questions about Judaism that merit analysis—what is a Judaism of the Japanese mind? Kotsuji's autobiography becomes the key to two men's business acumen and the conception of their shared faith, even if the promise of this branch of Judaism, at least as envisioned by Kotsuji, did not come to fruition (Yaakov [Stephen] Geis, personal communication, 27 June 2024; "Religion: Japanese Jew", 1959).¹¹

Presumably, *From Tokyo to Jerusalem* was a way to glorify God and provide the truth, at least of Kotsuji's own search. But it was a work in English, not Japanese, and while Kotsuji did mention that his library in Tokyo would include much existent literature in English, as 'so many educated Japanese already know English', it nevertheless seems an odd weapon of faith in his arsenal (Kotsuji 1964, 215). Similarly, the book is clearly aimed at an audience who, while not unlearned, lacks

familiarity with many basic elements and mores of Japanese life. Thus, he explains aspects of Japanese culture that do not require explication to Japanese nationals, both in the homeland or in the diaspora, whether educated or not (Kotsuji 1964, 5, 6, 11).¹² Of course, part of Kotsuji's work, including that which ostensibly helped to fund his Institute, were the speaking tours outside of Japan. A book would, of course, be a way to reach audiences unable to attend such tours as well as pique the interest of those who might attend future tours, to say nothing of the possible funds deriving from royalties. It would not be Japanese yen that would fund his work, but dollars, pounds, and shekels. Thus, it was necessary to write in a *lingua franca*, in this case, English.

According to Kotsuji's own preface, his story would have gone unwritten, save for the imploring of his publisher, Bernard Geis. Yet, as noted above, Geis was hardly the most traditional purveyor of missionising literature. Geis was Jewish, but was not practising, and, according to his son, harboured a distinct antipathy towards organised religion. And while Geis was iconoclastic, so too was he relatively pragmatic. This was not the same spiritual undertaking that motivated Kotsuji, but benefits could be reaped, nonetheless. As the noted author and activist (and former employee of Bernard Geis Associates) Letty Cottin Pogrebin recalled, 'I don't think Berney cared about Kotsuji's cause'. Rather, 'he cared about Kotsuji's story and its saleability'. As far as pushing Kotsuji to publish his life story, Pogrebin recollected that manuscripts were rarely actively solicited or commissioned, save from 'celebrities or people in the news whom Berney, or one of the editors, thought would sell in the marketplace of that era'. Certainly, there might have been an audience for Kotsuji's work, though it was hardly along the lines of that for Brown's risqué *Sex and the Single Girl* (Brown 1962) or Susann's salacious *Valley of the Dolls* (Susann 1966). Since most of 'the kinds of books we had published before ... tended to be a bit sensational, or by or about prominent people with unique back stories', it seems less likely that this work was one that Geis pursued for a purpose, since its 'saleability' was less assured (Yaakov [Stephen] Geis, personal communication, 19 May 2024, 27 June 2024; Letty Cottin Pogrebin, personal communication, 27 June 2024, 30 June 2024).

None of this was out of character or contrary to the mission of the publishing house, if not the work itself. Pogrebin remembered that, initially, Geis preferred to seek out works by individuals who were not known as writers (McLaws Helms 2023). Yet, Kotsuji had a history of publishing, albeit academic and in Japanese. And, while Kotsuji was prominent among the small coterie of Japanese individuals whose work during World War Two assisted a small number of Jewish refugees, his fame, even among them, was hardly enough to ensure a profit. Was Kotsuji's back story unique enough to merit Geis's attention? In fairness,

most of the work is a fairly straightforward look at a faith journey, with stops along the way to attempt to rectify antisemitism among members of the Japanese government and similarly to assist the refugee community that had been created by antisemitism elsewhere. Thus, it is the brief preface and the slightly lengthier conclusion that mark the work as intriguing. It was, after all, a story related by a character, for who else (and this is intended as a compliment) would open a work on an operating table for a ritual circumcision? Who else would dream to create a syncretic faith that was organic and specific, the aforementioned ‘genuine living Judaism, which will take into consideration the special nature of the Japanese mind’? In Kotsuji, then, Geis found an individual who was as much of a character as he was. Even in their shared faith, the two could not be more disparate in character—the former a devout scholar and diplomatic humanitarian, the latter a marketing genius and societal renegade—, but in their innovation and iconoclasm, both **were** characters (Kotsuji 1964, 1, 214; George Vecsey, personal communication, 9 July 2024).

Kotsuji’s dream of a union between Japanese ideologies and Judaism remains unfulfilled, but his work on fusing a personal relationship between Israel and Japan in the reshaping of each nation after the war was extraordinary. Geis’s vision of a brand of publishing to combine television and books to broadcast literature, ‘doing America a great service by harnessing TV’s power’, reshaped marketing (“Books: Peach-Fuzz Bluebeard”, 1959). Literally worlds apart for much of their lives, the two men were united in a single goal by the publication of Kotsuji’s work. Both believed that the key to Judaism was in publishing, and that the possibilities of a Judaism of the Japanese people held promise, although the outcome was to remain solely economic. Nevertheless, it was on the relationships fostered that Kotsuji’s Judaism of the Japanese mind rested, not necessarily in the proselytism that Kotsuji flirted with or the commercial success that Geis desired, but in the human connections they fostered, if not as tzaddikim, then certainly as fellow Jews.

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Endnotes

¹ When discussing Kotsuji’s life before his conversion, as well as the names of other Japanese individuals, the traditional Japanese naming conventions, where the family name proceeds the personal name, are used.

² Geis was described in an article in *The New York Times* gleefully reporting his financial woes as a dapper and a ‘familiar figure in the city’s social life’, with the implication that Geis was perhaps more likely to be among Manhattan’s hoi polloi on a Friday night than among his congregation’s minyan (Raymont 1971, 30).

³ See the work of Yamada Jundai, Hirose Yoshiji, David Kranzler, and Marvin Toyaker.

⁴ It was during this time that he got into a theological discussion on the nature of the Nicene Creed with Dr. August Reischauer, father of the renowned diplomat and Japanese scholar Edwin Reischauer.

⁵ Still, his time in Hokkaido was not without its rewards, for it was here he met his future wife, a fellow Presbyterian named Iwane Mineko.

⁶ Yasue Norihiro’s entire speech is included the appendices of David Kranzler’s dissertation, where it is part of a memorandum from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Konoye Fumimaro, to the ambassador in Manchukuo, and the consuls-general in Mukden (Shenyang), Harbin, Nanking (Nanjing), Shanghai, Chingtao (Qingdao), Peking (Beijing), and Tientsin (Tianjin) (Kranzler 1971).

⁷ Certainly, his speaking tours in Japan, limited though they were, similarly ran up against the proverbial (and vociferous) party line. Famed journalist and intellectual Kiyosawa Kiyoshi attended one such talk and found it exceedingly edifying and enlightening, but noted in his private journals that it was drowned out by the blatant antisemitism of the majority of his compatriots, leading him to feel disgust and disdain for his fellow subjects (Kiyosawa 1970, 77-8).

⁸ Mikasa did establish the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan in 1954 and, throughout his life, continued to sponsor and participate in archaeological digs in the Middle East, finally establishing the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan ‘to house a collection of research materials ... and provide academic facilities for researchers’ (Butler 2015).

⁹ It is similarly notable that Kotsuji eventually chose Abraham, not Avram or Abram for his name. Abraham is the English version of the name. It is certainly not easier to pronounce in Japanese than Abram. Both Abraham and Abram require the same syllables (*ah-bu-ra*), with the former ending with another two (*ha-mu*) and the latter with one (*mu*). ‘Abraham’ would have been more familiar to English-speaking audiences worldwide, including those more familiar with the New Testament.

¹⁰ After this incident, Geis would shore up his finances by renting space in his publishing company’s headquarters, where, prior to their signing the lease, he would ask potential tenants to avail themselves of the fire pole that the then septegenarian preferred as his mode of descent after work (Zinsser 2008).

¹¹ As noted, I conducted email correspondence and telephone communication with family, friends, and associates of Bernard Geis, including Yaakov [Stephen] Geis, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and George Vecsey. I am grateful to each of them for their candour and kindness.

¹² As an example, Kotsuji relates how, in primary school, children played ‘Genji and Heike’ as a ‘Japanese “Cowboys and Indians”’. He spends the next paragraph briefly identifying basic aspects of the Genpei War. While still accounting for any discrepancies in education in the early twentieth century and the postwar period, the expectation of complete unfamiliarity with the struggle indicates that the book’s audience is clearly not meant to include anyone educated within the Japanese school system (Kotsuji 1964, 11).