

TIMEOUT

timeout@japantimes.co.jp

TOKYO'S 'HOUSE OF HOPE'

REFUGE of LAST RESORT

By TOMOKO OTAKE

It is 9 o'clock on a freezing winter's morning in Sanya, eastern Tokyo, a blighted day laborers' mecca. Now, it is home to thousands of aging men on welfare.

Already at that time, a local eatery is full of gnarled old men clutching cans of booze. Outside, a few others are squatting down, enjoying an early-morning pow-wow. A couple of blocks away past several down-at-heel *doya* (no-frills boarding houses), a motley group of guys are playing at dice on the sidewalk. All the while, a man in a black, knee-length down coat is quietly tracking the outsider's movements.

Physically across from that fresco casino, but light years away in other respects, is Kibo no Ie (House of Hope). Opened in October 2002 by Masaki Yamamoto and his wife Mie, the 21-room hospice is literally the refuge of last resort for people who are homeless, have no family bonds — and are dying. In a final irony, it is a place where residents whose lives have often been devoid of love and sympathy can receive plenty of both before slipping off this mortal coil.

In the mid-1990s, while he was studying theology at Sophia University in Tokyo, Yamamoto first launched a nationwide campaign to build "family houses" — facilities where families could stay while their severely ill children underwent inpatient treatment at hospitals far away from their homes. Now, he says, the four-story Kibo no Ie, which has a tiny chapel on the roof, is the embodiment of his longtime ideals on hospices.

"In Japan, the hospice movement started in the 1980s, with the opening of [palliative care units] at Christian-spirited hospitals in Osaka and Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture. But I had long harbored more romantic ideals for hospices," Yamamoto said, adding that he is offering care not only to people facing imminent death, but also to those who have fallen through society's cracks — or "who have maxed out their social credit."

Yamamoto jokingly says his hospice is like a

"department of diseases," since he has housed nearly 70 patients with everything from HIV and cancer to heart disease, Parkinson's and schizophrenia. Most are referrals from "hospitals then? Sorry," he says.

Kibo no Ie has also served as a temporary shelter for "healthy" people with nowhere else to go — such as a woman with a personality disorder who was pregnant with her third child, but whose family rejected her because she abandoned her previous two babies.

The average length of stay at Kibo no Ie is about six months — and so far, Yamamoto has arranged the funerals of 30 people.

"It's strange, but you get used to hosting funerals," he said calmly, as he arrived recently for the funeral of a Taiwan-born man who died of lung cancer at the age of 80. He was taken to a



Masaki and Mie Yamamoto (left), the husband-and-wife founders of Kibo no Ie (House of Hope), a hospice in Tokyo's downtown Sanya district for elderly and infirm people down on their luck. Residents (below) listen to oldies music at a weekly tea-and-coffee gathering. ERIC FREEDMAN PHOTOS

hospital and had been evacuated to his mother's family home in Iwakuni, Yamaguchi Prefecture.

There, on August 6, he remembers watching the huge mushroom cloud rise in the sky as the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

Times back then were particularly tough, and Shibata — who has now lost his eyesight and has a severe immune-system illness — says he sometimes subsisted on tree roots. In Tokyo after the war, he also flirted with the underworld. Unfortunately for him, his career option soon saw him being thrown into juvenile penitentiaries after being caught dealing in *hiropon* (methamphetamine), a stimulant that was popular at the time.

Once back on the straight and narrow, Shibata says that he studied independently to become a licensed barber, and later a certified cook. That led to him owning a makeshift beachfront *oden* (steamed food) stall in Kanagawa Prefecture, before stints working as a cab driver, a photographer and an extra at a film studio. He even crewed on whaling ships, which took him all over the world, from San Francisco to New York to San Paulo.

Despite his checkered background, Shibata — a short man with a fondness for flashy sports jackets and jeans — is a popular fixture at Kibo no Ie's weekly tea parties where residents chat with each other or with staff and listen to the mellow strains of 1950s and '60s stars like Yuijiro Ishihara.

Some residents are more reticent — though that doesn't mean they lack a story to tell.

One such man is Yasunisa Sato, 67, who was among the many Japanese who once used *hiropon* — in his case to overcome his fear of heights while working for around three years in the early '50s as a welder in the construction of Tokyo Tower.

Before that, Sato had been a sergeant in the Imperial Japanese Army and saw action in



Manchuria, the Philippines and Singapore — where he was among the force that captured a heavily fortified British garrison in a surprise attack from the dense jungles of the Malay Peninsula; his enemy had wrongly assumed that no fighting force could approach from that side.

"We were all crazy in those days," said Sato, a broad-shouldered man who is now blind. As he sat beside his bed, he recalled the war, saying that he spent pretty much most of the time "just thinking about how to kill people."

"I killed quite a bit, with my bayonet. In hand-to-hand combat, no one could be in a normal state of mind. It was a situation where you either kill or get killed. . . . But now we live in a peaceful society, and I feel a nasty taste in my mouth. I feel the curses of people who I killed; their spirits haunt me. I still have nightmares."

Sato became a POW at the end of the war, and

spent the next 10 years struggling to survive in Siberian camps. Over the years, he says, he has tried to kill himself many times — most recently at the hospice, by trying to hang himself in his closet with a scarf.

"But the knot in the scarf came undone, and he ended up banging his head on the floor," says Haruko Sato, who works at the hospice and clearly looks on the elderly man who shares her family name as if he were an uncle.

Sato has deep scars around his belly, he says, from the time he tried to commit *hara-kiri* in front of the statue of Meiji Era War Minister Masujiro Omura at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo.

"Why? Because I'm Japanese!" he answered loudly and forcefully when asked why he'd done it. "I was a soldier in the Imperial Japanese Army and I was taught to commit *hara-kiri* if I ever

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A resident with terminal liver cancer (left) gazes at television in his room. Harriet Carol Sack (right) strums a melody for a 91-year-old resident. Locals (far right) roll dice on a Sanya sidewalk.

