

Fune Ni Miru Nihonjin Iminshi: Kasato Maru kara kuruzu kyakusen e
[“Japanese Emigration History As Seen Through Ships:
From the *Kasato Maru* to Passenger Cruisers”]

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Article 16

Epidemic Outbreak

First published in *Seki no Kansen (Ships of the World)*, February 1995

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The *Wakasa Maru* Mass Death Incident

On April 25, 1918, the Nihon Yusen Kaisha (NYK) line's *Wakasa Maru* left Kobe with 1862 emigrants bound for Brazil. Of that number, 1,422 were the first emigrants carried by Kaigai Kogyo, a nationally chartered emigration company. Because Kaigai Kogyo was established through a merger of emigration companies at the end of the previous year, this South American voyage was a memorable occasion for the new company. According to NYK's "50 Year History," the number of emigrants on this voyage was 1,862, but according to Foreign Ministry Records, the number was 1,854 of whom 1,084 were men and 770 were women.

The *Wakasa Maru* entered Singapore on May 12, eight days after leaving port. Although a few days later than usual, it was not especially tardy. A normal voyage for a mail steamer would take about 65 days on the South American route from Kobe to Santos. In other words, the ship should have reached Santos at the end of June. However, the *Wakasa Maru* entered Santos on July 17, or 84 days after leaving Kobe.

What happened on the *Wakasa Maru*?

I searched newspaper articles of the time in the Diet Library. News related to immigration appears more frequently in Kansai newspapers than in Tokyo newspapers. This case was no exception. The following article, based on a special May 13 dispatch from Singapore, appeared in the May 15 edition of the *Osaka Asahi Shimbun*.

Epidemic on the *Wakasa Maru* (May 13 special dispatch from Singapore)

One person has died of cerebrospinal meningitis on the *Wakasa Maru*, which entered Singapore on May 12 carrying emigrants bound for Brazil. There are fears that new cases will appear. The local authorities have prohibited passengers from leaving the quarantine station and are not able to prevent its spread. Further, the captain of the ship says that if no preventative serum can be procured to replace the ship's supply that has been used up, he will have to cancel the voyage and return to Kobe.

From this first report we learn that cerebrospinal meningitis had spread and one immigrant died from it. The captain was pushing for canceling the voyage because they had used up the ship's supply of vaccine. The worst tragedy in Japan's emigration ship history was happening at that very moment.

Cerebrospinal meningitis, or more accurately, epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis, is a contagious disease that is caused by an infection of the meningitis bacteria. The first confirmed case of the disease in Japan was recorded in 1897 at the Sasebo Naval Hospital. In 1902, the disease was rampant in the prostitution quarters in Yoshiwara. Even though a vaccine existed, it was a frightful disease with a high death rate.

After the May 15 article, there were no follow-up reports of the incident. Over two months later, an entry of the *Osaka Asahi Shimbun* on July 24 closed the doors on the incident:

Wakasa Maru Reaches Brazil

The NYK steamship *Wakasa Maru* (6600 tons), which left Kobe on April 25 carrying 1800 emigrants bound for Brazil was, temporarily stopped between Moji and Singapore and subjected to sufficient preventative measures. However, because of favorable sanitary conditions, the *Wakasa Maru* safely reached Santos on July 17 and all emigrants have disembarked. (July 23 telegram to [NYK])

This article via NYK is strange. Not only does it make no mention of the fatalities, but its overall tone is inconsistent with the despair expressed in the May 15 article. However, if we take a look at Koyama Rokuro's *Imin Yonjunen Shi (40-Year Emigration History)* we see the following:

The *Wakasa Maru*, which left Kobe carrying over 1,800 passengers on April 25, 1918, had an outbreak of cerebrospinal meningitis on board. Although there were efforts to sanitize the ship between Moji and Singapore, 60 people died.

He gives an account that is different from the newspaper article. The fact that 60 people died was shocking and the incident was by no means as minor as it was portrayed in the newspaper article.

Concealed Tragedy

It is best to find out about the conditions on sea voyages by looking at marine journals [[could this also be translated as “ship’s logs”](#)]. I went straight to Tokyo Shosen University, since it keeps a considerable amount of NYK’s pre-war marine journals. However, there were no *Wakasa Maru* journals for that time period. At first it looked as if there would be no evidence left of the incident, but I discovered some memoirs that told the real story of the incident in a publication called *Imin Unsosen no Kenkyu (Emigration Transport Ship Research)* that was published in 1930 by the Commerce Bureau of the Foreign Ministry.

The memoirs were those of an overseas Japanese doctor named Takaoka Sentaro and were part of his proposal to establish a system of hygiene for emigration ships. He made his proposal after a cholera outbreak on the *Hawai Maru* in 1928. Takaoka, who had been commissioned by the Kaigai Kogyo [emigration company], was the managing director of the *Zai Burajiru Dohjinkai* at the time. The *Dohjinkai* was a public health organization that had been established in Sao Paulo by overseas Japanese in 1924. Although written in old-fashioned language and difficult to read, I present some related excerpts from his memoirs because it is a valuable record of the facts.

In my memory are the tragic incidents that happened on an emigration transport ships. First, in 1918 there was an outbreak of cerebrospinal meningitis on the *Wakasa Maru* (a ship belonging to NYK). The ship was detained for 24 days in Singapore and it dropped anchor in Santos, Brazil, 84 days after leaving Kobe. Fifty-three people died during the voyage. In the waters near Brazil the bodies of the dead were placed in eight coffins and one corpse that was abandoned in the corner of the ship's hold. A person from a certain prefecture was buried at sea. There was a conspiracy to conceal what had happened. The stench three days after death was made worse by the ghastly scene within the dark hold of the ship. People averted their eyes and did not take care of the corpse. Summoning up courage and urging Mr. Onaga, the managing secretary of the Dohjinkai to help me, we disposed of the corpse.... This incident of the emigration ship *Wakasa Maru* is etched in our minds, never to be forgotten.

Takaoka gives a detailed discussion of the 53 people during the voyage, the 24 days the ship was held at Singapore, the eight coffins for the corpses, the corpse abandoned in the ship's hold, and the clean up job that he and others were forced to carry out. It is an account that tells of the gruesome conditions on the *Wakasa Maru* on its way to Santos and of the tragedy of emigrants lost even before they stepped onto the new land.

Even though it was taken from memoirs, it is part of a proposal submitted to the state (Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) regarding emigration ship hygiene. Moreover, because Takaoka was a doctor commissioned by Kagai Kogyo, judging from its specific details, it is very unlikely to be a fabrication.

So what was the aforementioned "July 23 NYK telegram" article about? I can only imagine that the people involved were trying to conceal the incident. In this regard, the director of the Brazil Japanese Immigration Archives in San Paulo wrote in a letter to me that "it is clear that the emigration company, the consulate, and others concealed the incident and avoided making it public."

It was accepted practice to bury people at sea if they died during a voyage, and even now a ship's captain has the authority to follow this practice. In the beginning of the Showa Period, it was normal for one to three people to die of sickness en route and five or more deaths occurring was not rare. When there was a burial at sea, a funeral was performed and the body was wrapped in a flag and taken to the stern of the ship and pushed over.

Two Diseases Sweep Through the *Hakata Maru*

In 1918, the same year of the *Wakasa Maru* incident, epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis spread through the Kansai Region. In April, this epidemic was declared a legal epidemic. Kobe was marked as a designated epidemic site. Because of the situation, NYK moved the departure port for its next ship, the *Hakata Maru*, from Kobe to Nagasaki. A related article appeared in the July 7 edition of *Osaka Asahi Shimbun*.

South American Emigrants to Depart

Because of the cerebrospinal meningitis epidemic, the port of departure for South American emigrants has been moved to Nagasaki. On the 8th of this month, [NYK] will move its passenger ship *Hakata Maru* from Kobe to Nagasaki. On the 11th, the ship will leave Nagasaki and make stops at Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Africa on its way to Santos. The number of emigrants traveling as families will be about 1,600.

However, the next year in 1919, a similar tragedy occurred on the *Hakata Maru*. The *Hakata Maru* left Kobe on January 26 with 619 emigrants (366 men and 253 women and children). Epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis spread through the ship when it was en route and 36 people died. The epidemic was especially severe since it killed one out of seventeen emigrants.

The fact that this incident has been written about in several emigration histories confirms that it actually happened. However, it is difficult to find any more data on it since there were no reports of it in any of the newspapers at the time. The persons involved concealed the incident and hushed up the 36 deaths.

Koyama writes about a massive outbreak of measles on the same *Hakata Maru* voyage in *Imin Shi 40-nen Shi*. From this account, we can imagine that the *Hakata Maru* resembled a hospital ship during the epidemic.

When the *Hakata Maru*, which left Kobe on January 21 (sic) of the next year 1919, reached Santos on March 17, it was carrying many children afflicted with measles. Because of this, the Brazilian port inspector imposed a strict quarantine and sent the ship to the Ilha Grande Quarantine Station. More than one hundred patients and their families were kept at the station. After being held for eight days the rest of the passengers were allowed to disembark. The patients were kept for two months before being allowed to go to the designated plantations. This was the first time that Japanese emigrants were kept in quarantine.

The spread of such epidemics through ships can be attributed to the inferior living conditions on those ships. Bacteria and viruses -- epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis, measles, or whatever -- were brought aboard from Japan and spread because of the close skin contact that was unavoidable given that the emigrants lived in the unsanitary bunk bed conditions.

The *Wakasa Maru* and *Hakata Maru* incidents occurred just as Brazilian emigration was being heavily promoted as a part of national policy. Even though the victims were emigrants who were far removed from their mother county, the impact of the incidents on NYK was undoubtedly great. The incidents raised questions regarding not only sanitary conditions on its ships, but also regarding its overall role as a emigrant transport ship company. For six or seven years, the *Wakasa Maru* and *Hakata Maru* were not used on the West-South America sea route.

Yusen's company histories and published materials remain silent on these incidents. Perhaps no records are found because the incidents involved the deaths of helpless emigrants or because they were disgraceful. In any case, modern marine transport histories tend to be written from the point

of view of ship operators and this incident is a good example of how historical fact becomes obscured when history relies only on data from transport companies.

Ships with hygiene problems continuing to reach its ports would force Brazil to beef up its quarantine preparations and change its treatment of Japanese immigrants. This would have a fundamental affect on Brazil's immigration policies.

In the final analysis, investments would have to be made in modern emigration ships with proper sanitary and medical facilities to prevent this type of incident from happening again. It would be natural to assume that this issue was debated in the planning stages for new ships. However, after this period, NYK's management posture toward its Westward-South America route became suddenly passive. Lessons learned from the tragedies were put into practice by Osaka Shosen Kaisha (OSK) in the form of the "*Santos Maru*" class of ships.

The *Hawai Maru* Cholera Incident

With the appearance of the modernized "*Santos Maru*" class of emigrant ships, tragedies such as the *Wakasa Maru* incident disappeared. However, in 1928, the year that OSK's South American route went into operation, there was a cholera outbreak on the conventional type emigration ship *Hawai Maru*. This was a classic case of what we would now call an emigration ship epidemic. The incident was covered in all the major papers. The following is the lead paragraph from a related article in the April 5 evening edition of the *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun*.

(Singapore, April 3) The *Hawai Maru*, an Osaka Shosen Kaisha steamship traveling its South American route and carrying over 780 immigrants bound for South America, left here on April 1 to go to South America via South Africa. However, because there was an outbreak of cholera aboard, it returned and was docked at the quarantine station. Seven cholera patients have already died and 11 are undergoing treatment. One first class passenger has also been afflicted with cholera but the case is not serious. The *Hawai Maru* left Kobe on March 27 with 580 Japanese emigrants heading to South America in steerage. Of the emigrants, three hundred twenty-one were male and two hundred fifty-nine were female.

On the *Hawai Maru* were 10 first class passengers and 772 third class passengers including special third class passengers (tokusan). The crew numbered 118. Of the third class passengers, 580 were contract emigrant laborers. Most of the 580 were part of the first group of emigrants to be sent out from the National Emigration Center (Kokuritsu Imin Shuyojjo) that was opened in February of that year in Kobe.

The *Hawai Maru*, which left Kobe on March 17, made port calls at Nagasaki, Hong Kong, and Saigon. It reached Singapore on March 31, but the cholera was brought aboard from Saigon. The cholera outbreak started there in February of that year and was in full swing by March. Because of the outbreak, the League of Nations branch office in Singapore issued a report to health authorities in other countries. The Japanese Government also dispatched a report to ships on the ocean.

The *Hawai Maru* entered Saigon on March 27 and left there the following day--in middle of the cholera epidemic. Since cholera is spread orally [~~Wesley: please double-check that this is what Yamada means to say~~], a most likely source was the food and water that was brought aboard. In addition, however, one passenger was let aboard from Saigon. Since this passenger showed signs of the sickness after boarding, this person was a possible source of the sickness. In any case, the *Hawai Maru* stopped at Saigon even with the knowledge that there was a cholera epidemic. It should have avoided Saigon if the situation had allowed it. The reason it could not avoid Saigon probably had something to do with the load it was carrying. In the days that followed, OSK was forced to face many inquiries about its responsibilities.

One-Month Stay in Singapore

The cholera outbreak occurred only four hours after the ship left Singapore. The ship had left Singapore on April 1 and was headed to Colombo when the captain decided to return. It reached Singapore again on April 3 and docked at the quarantine anchorage area. The captain's decision to turn back was valid since the ship's doctor had fallen sick from trying to quell the mass outbreak.

The *Hawai Maru* immediately underwent a thorough disinfection under the guidance of the British Epidemic Preventative Commissioner. The passengers and the entire crew were given vaccination shots and stool examinations. Those with the disease were taken to an isolated ward on the outlying Saint Johns Island and given treatment. There are differing accounts regarding the number of cases, but the most common figure given is 53. Seventeen of the afflicted died. However, due to the frantic efforts of the Singaporean authorities, the epidemic was more or less under control by the middle of April. After a long 30-day stay in Singapore, the ship set sail again for South America, leaving 8 carriers of the disease and 7 family members.

The 17 deaths from this incident were much fewer than the 53 who died on the *Wakasa Maru* and the 36 who died on the *Hakata Maru*. However, this incident is seen as the representative example of incidents of mass death due to epidemics on South American emigration ships. In this respect, it was an unfortunate incident for Osaka Shosen, which had invested in the new "*Santos Maru*" class of ships and made efforts to improve both the hardware and software aspects of emigrant transport.

The incident happened during the peak of emigration to Brazil and there was no attempt to conceal it. The newspapers consistently reported it. This is probably why it became the representative emigration ship epidemic incident. Moreover, perhaps much can be said of the influence of the novel *Sohboh* (~~?reading unknown~~).

"Around 1928, there was an outbreak of cholera cases among the emigrants on the emigration ship *Hawai Maru* after it made a stop at Hong Kong. With each death, the structure of emigrant families began to fall apart and the ship was not allowed to enter Singapore. This major incident ended with the ship returning to Japan."

That was how Ishikawa described the incident, with some deviation from the truth. When World War I broke out, the *Kiyo Maru* was detained at Honolulu for 72 days before it meandered back to Japan. However, there has never been any ship that turned back because of an epidemic.

