

Guide to the Beate Sirota Gordon Papers circa 1924-2020

Born October 25, 1923
Died December 30, 2012

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Administrative Information

Provenance: Personal donation from Beate Sirota Gordon and family.

Access: Collection is open for research.

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Descriptive Summary

Extent: ~ 27 linear feet (43 manuscript boxes, 7 oversize boxes, 1 oversize folder, 77 books)

Languages: Primarily English and Japanese; also German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, and Chinese.

Indexing Terms: Gordon, Beate.
Women -- Political activity.
Feminism.
Arts -- Asia.
Impresarios.
United States -- Politics and government.
Japan -- Description and travel.
Mills College -- Alumni and alumnae.
Japan. Kenpō (1946)

Biography:

Born October 25, 1923 in Vienna, Beate moved to Tokyo in 1929 with her mother, Augustine (Horenstein) Sirota, and her famous concert pianist father, Leo Sirota. Leo Sirota accepted a position at the Imperial Academy of Music, which is now the Tokyo

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University of the Arts. In Japan, Beate attended first the German School in Omori (circa 1929-1935), then the American School in Naka-Meguro (circa 1935-1939).

Beate enrolled at Mills College at age 16 in 1939. She studied languages (Spanish, French, Russian, and Japanese) and literature. During her time at Mills, she formed a close relationship with the French composer, Darius Milhaud, and his wife Madeleine. Beate's parents visited in 1941 and returned on the last boat from the United States to Japan before the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941. As World War II loomed, she was cut off from all contact with Japan and her parents.

Thanks to her language skills, in 1942 Beate worked at the CBS Listening Post (later called the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service of the Federal Communications Commission) as a translator. The following year, she graduated from Mills College and started work with the Office of War Information. In this position, she wrote scripts and chose music to be broadcast for an initiative known as "Reverse Tokyo Rose." By March 1945, Beate moved to New York City to work as an editorial researcher for *Time* magazine.

In December 1945, Beate became the first civilian woman allowed into Japan when she joined General MacArthur's staff as an interpreter and researcher for the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander Allied Powers (SCAP). This assignment allowed Beate to reconnect with her parents, who eventually moved to the United States in 1946. She worked extensively on the research for the Japanese Constitution, was a translator for part of the negotiations, and authored Article 24 on women's rights. Her work on the Japanese Constitution became a lifelong passion, as she continued her advocacy for women's rights and peace.

It was through her work with the Government Section that Beate met her husband Joseph Gordon. They married on January 15, 1948, eight months after Beate moved back to the United States. The couple's first years of marriage were spent in Poughkeepsie, New York, though they soon moved back to New York City. While Joseph worked towards a master's degree in Far Eastern Studies at Columbia University, Beate obtained a job translating for a bank.

In 1952, Beate served as a translator on the U.S. tour of the prominent Japanese feminist, Fusae Ichikawa. This allowed Beate the chance to travel the country and meet people such as President-elect Dwight Eisenhower and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Soon after that assignment ended, Beate was invited to contribute to a special issue of *Theater Arts Magazine*. This led to a job with the Japan Society and the start of Beate's

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career as a noted impresario. Within five years, she became the head of the Japan Society's performing arts program.

During this time, she also gave birth to two children, Nicole (1954) and Geoffrey (1958). The Tokyo Broadcasting System produced a television film based on the children's trip to Japan with Beate in 1964, called *Nicky no Nikki*, or *Nicky's Diary*.

By 1970, Beate was named the Director of the Performing Arts Programs of New York's Asia Society. In this role, she brought dancers, musicians and performers from all over Asia to audiences in the United States. She travelled extensively and immersed herself in the culture to search for the most talented performers. Beate retired from the Asia Society in 1991, though she continued to serve as Senior Consultant for Performing Arts until 1993.

Beate received numerous awards, including the Bessie Award (1990), the Avon Grand Award to Women in Japan (1997), and the Asian Cultural Council's John D. Rockefeller 3rd Award (1997). She received honorary degrees from both Mills College (1991) and Smith College (2008).

Many publications were dedicated to Beate's work in the arts and politics, including her memoir, *The Only Woman in the Room, Last Boat to Yokohama: The Life and Legacy of Beate Sirota Gordon*, the films *The Sirota Family and the 20th Century*, and *The Gift from Beate*.

Beate Sirota Gordon died December 30, 2012 in New York, just four months after her husband passed.

Scope and Content:

The Beate Sirota Gordon Papers house the personal papers of Beate Sirota Gordon. This collection, which dates from 1924 to 2016, consists of documents, photographs, audiovisual material, books, and ephemera, evidencing Beate's life experiences as a child in Japan, her primary school education, her Mills College education, involvement with drafting the Japanese Constitution, and career as an impresario for the Japan Society and the Asia Society. This collection also includes research papers from Beate's husband Joseph Gordon's studies at Columbia University.

Beate's Japanese language papers can be found at the National Women's Education Center (NVEC) in Saitama, Japan (www.nwec.jp).

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This collection consists of the following series:

Record Group 1: Papers

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Subseries 1.3: Mills College

Subseries 1.4: Programs

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Series 2: Constitution

Series 3: Asia Society

Series 4: Other Professional Activities

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Subseries 4.2: Speeches and Lectures

Subseries 4.3: Columbia Oral History

Subseries 4.4: Reverse Tokyo Rose

Subseries 4.5: Miscellaneous

Subseries 4.6: Monthly Planners

Series 5: Subject Files

Series 6: Awards & Honors

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Subseries 7.3: Fan Letters

Series 8: Publications

Subseries 8.1: The Only Woman in the Room

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Record Group 2: Audiovisual

Series 1: English language media

Series 2: Japanese language media

Series 3: BSG Music Collection

Record Group 3: Books

Record Group 4: Joseph Gordon research papers

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Additional Resources:

Beate Gordon & Ann Lenway oral history: <http://library.mills.edu/record=b1204159~S6>

“Beate Gordon, Long-Unsung Heroine of Japanese Women’s Rights, Dies at 89.” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/02/world/asia/beate-gordon-feminist-heroine-in-japan-dies-at-89.html>

BSG: From Victorian Europe to Late 20th Century America (timeline) – See Series 8: Publications – Subseries 8.1: The Only Woman in the Room (Box 26, Folder 11)

Last boat to Yokohama: the life and legacy of Beate Sirota Gordon by Nassrine Azimi & Michel Wasserman, with a foreword by Beate Sirota Gordon:
<https://library.mills.edu/record=b1813505~S6>

Le cadeau de Béat  by executive producer, Akamatsu Ryoko, Iwata Kimie, Ochiai Ryo; written & directed by Fujiwara Tomoko: <http://library.mills.edu/record=b1772075~S6>

The Only Woman in the Room: a memoir by Beate Sirota Gordon:
<https://library.mills.edu/record=b1102439~S6>

The Sirota family and the 20th century: <http://library.mills.edu/record=b1772074~S6>