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Saburo Hatta (1865—1935)

By

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At the end of Shogun Tokugawa's régime when old Japan was stirred up with home and foreign affairs, on September 27th, 1865, Saburo Hatta was born, the son of a samurai, Mr. Nakamura of the Kumamoto clan, and thus in his younger days he held the name of Santaro Nakamura. From his childhood he possessed an eminent physique and energetic temperament. As he grew up to be a large boy he moved to Tokyo, and prosecuted his studies under great difficulties as did most of the samurai's children at that time. At the Doitsu-kyokai, a German High School in Tokyo, he received his preliminary education. Then, having determined upon a scientific career, he entered the College of Science at the Tokyo Imperial University as a special student of zoology under Professor K. Mitsukuri. He took a particular interest in vertebrate zoology and later specialized in the study of the development of petromyzon which is considered one of the most difficult materials for embryological work. During that time he was adopted into the family of Tomonori Hatta, a famous classical scholar in Japanese literature belonging formerly to the Kumamoto clan, and from that time he was called Saburo Hatta. Though he began his career as a biologist, he was much influenced by classical Japanese literature. Thus in his personality he was of very strong character and had a heroic air.

Hatta's enthusiastic struggle in the university course to overcome the hard work on petromyzon, which he confessed at times was almost misery in spite of the constant encouragement given by Prof. Mitsukuri, was at last rewarded and he graduated in 1891. His work was made public under the heading "On the Formation of the Germinal Layers in Petromyzon" in the Journal of the College of Science, Tokyo Imperial University[1]. In this he said he would have an ever-lasting interest and also possess courage to overcome whatever was hard in his work, until in later years he gained universal recognition as an authority in that field.

(1) J. Coll. Sci. Imp. Univ. Tokyo, Vol. X, Pt. II, 1897.

Jour. Fac. Sci., Hokkaido Imp. Univ., Series VI, Zoology, Vol. V, No. 1, 1936.

Immediately following his graduation Hatta occupied a temporary position at the Kyushugakuin, one of the High Schools in his native land, teaching German and biology. In the next year, 1893, he was offered a new position as Professor of Zoology at the Peer's School in Tokyo. Besides teaching zoology Hatta was busy as he was also a trustee of the school. Notwithstanding, his career as a research-worker in embryology was brilliant and at the end of his experience at the Peer's School several papers on the development of petromyzon were published which were all of fundamental importance with regard to the mesoderm formation of vertebrate animals(1).

In 1904 Hatta was transferred from the Peer's School to the College of Agriculture in Sapporo where he continued his vivid academic career until his resignation in 1929. Later the Agricultural College was officially changed and became part of the Tohoku Imperial University. In 1908 he had the honour to be admitted to the degree of Dr. Sc. on account of his pioneer work on petromyzon development(2), and in the same year he was made a full professor. At the same time he was appointed to be a director of the University Museum in which the famous collection of bird's skins contributed by Capt. Blakiston is kept. Here it is safe to say that without Hatta's efforts, the collection, which had been scattered amongst several of the High Schools in Hokkaido and had received little care since Blakiston's time, would not have been brought together into one museum.

During his years in Hokkaido Hatta's attention was undoubtedly devoted to the interesting faunal situation of Hokkaido in relation to Saghalien and to the Asiatic Continent. Among a dozen more papers of interest so far published, his best known work is probably his "Zur Tiergeographie von Hokkaido" issued in the Zool. Anz. in Germany in 1913(3). He emphasized the peculiarity of the Strait of Soya which separates Saghalien from Hokkaido as the distinct demarcating line of animal distribution against the hypothesis of

(1) J. Coll. Sci. Imp. Univ. Tokyo, Vol. X, Pt. II, 1897.
Ann. Zool. Jap. Vol. I, Pt. IV, 1897.
J. Coll. Sci. Imp. Univ. Tokyo, Vol. XIII, Pt. III, 1900.
Ann. Zool. Jap. Vol. IV, Pt. 1, 1901.

(2) On the Gasrulation in Petromyzon. J. Coll. Sci. Imp. Univ. Tokyo, Vol. XXI, Art. II, 1907.

(3) Zool. Anz. Bd. XLIII, Nr. 1. 1913.

Capt. Blakiston who insisted that the Strait of Tsugaru would be a clearer demarcation line. In recognition of this important discovery the line in the Soya Strait has been termed the Hatta line.

Hatta went abroad for two years from the end of 1912 to the beginning of 1915 to study and inspect the institutes and museums in connection with zoology in Europe and America. Around this time he seemed to be in the most flourishing condition and after a year he made another tour to Germany in 1916 when his brilliant work on the development of the blood vessel system of petromyzon was made[1]. However, unfortunately the Great War was already in progress during his sojourn in Germany and he had a narrow escape from the danger of warfare. At that time he was detained at Kiel fortress but he was lucky to find one of the naval officers to be his friend in zoology. From Kiel he sailed for Scandinavia through the frightened North Sea and landed safe at Norway. Then going through Sweden and Finland he was able to catch the Trans-Siberian Railway, when he ran into another danger. He suffered from severe influenza and sank into a comatose state in the train. However he was fortunately saved from death thanks to the Russian Red Cross in the Siberian ambulance.

In 1918 the university in Sapporo became officially independent of the Tohoku Imperial University. His chair then belonged to the Hokkaido Imperial University. In 1927 Hatta made his third trip to Europe for 6 months and this time he landed at Constantinople and travelled through the Balkan States which he had long desired to visit. After having served for 25 years in the university he resigned from the chair and was made Professor Emeritus of the same university. During this period he was once one of the editors of the Annotationes Zoologicae Japonenses and the Journal of the College of Agriculture, Hokkaido Imperial University. On the other hand Hatta was also a member of the governmental committees for the protection of wild life since 1920. Undoubtedly the honour which he prized most highly was his election to honorary membership of the Société Royale Zoologique of Belgium.

In public life he showed an intense loyalty to his institution, to any task that he undertook, and to his friends and pupils. There are at present many eminent scholars who came under his influence. As

(1) Ueber die Entwicklung des Gefässsystems des Neunauges, Lampetra mitsukurii Hatta. Zool. Jahrb. Bd. 44, Art. f. Anatomie, S. 1–264, 1922.

regards academic life, he was not only a successful teacher and one who promoted the advancement of zoology, but he was also a leading member of the organizing committee of the Fisheries College of the university. When the new Faculty of Science was established in the Hokkaido Imperial University in 1930 he shared again in the organization. In addition the Akkeshi Marine Biological Laboratory, which is the only station in the world situated on the south-eastern coast of Hokkaido where the influence of the cold current may easily be studied, was started at his suggestion.

Though Hatta was of strong character and sure of himself in science, in his private life he had real warmheartedness. To a stranger Hatta, with his big physique, loud voice and resolute tenacity, probably appeared as an insolent man. But a brief acquaintance proved him to be a man of wide interests, of much sense, of unfailing good humor and of famed ability in the telling of a story. Those who were in close association with him made pilgrimages to his home as frequently as opportunity offered and they were given much pleasure. He was a home-loving man and his faithful wife was at one time and another a good assistant when he became absorbed over research work, helping him in his collection of animals of the field, and often going to the laboratory to call for him late at night. However, in his later life one of the great disappointments was that Mrs. Hatta became weak and had to live in Tokyo with her children. She died in 1929 and after his resignation Hatta lived a lonely life in the suburbs of Tokyo, devoting himself to editing books on vertebrate embryology in Japanese.

Previously Hatta had had slight kidney disease and it became suddenly serious on November 20th, 1935. Sad to say after a week of agony he took his last sleep on November 27th in spite of every medical assistance. The loss of a man of such activity and popularity is mourned greatly. However what he accomplished during his 35 years of active scientific work is a matter of certain record and this record places his name among the world known embryologists.

Of his family of two daughters and one son, the elder sister Mrs. Katsumoto lives with her family in Osaka, the younger Mrs. Matsuda resides in Fujisawa near Tokyo while the son Mr. Yasuo Hatta, graduate of the Rikkyo University, is at present a newspaperman with a bright future.