



The Only Woman in the Room: A Memoir of Japan, Human Rights, and the Arts

Beate Sirota Gordon

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In 1946, at age twenty-two, Beate Sirota Gordon helped to draft the new postwar Japanese Constitution. *The Only Woman in the Room* chronicles how a daughter of Russian Jews became the youngest woman to aid in the rushed, secret drafting of a constitution; how she almost single-handedly ensured that it would establish the rights of Japanese women; and how, as a fluent speaker of Japanese and the only woman in the room, she assisted the American negotiators as they worked to persuade the Japanese to accept the new charter.

Sirota was born in Vienna, but in 1929 her family moved to Japan so that her father, a noted pianist, could teach, and she grew up speaking German, English, and Japanese. Russian, French, Italian, Latin, and Hebrew followed, and at fifteen Sirota was sent to complete her education at Mills College in California. The formal declaration of World War II cut Gordon off from her parents, and she supported herself by working for a CBS listening post in San Francisco that would eventually become part of the FCC. Translating was one of Sirota's many talents, and when the war ended, she was sent to Japan as a language expert to help the American occupation forces. When General MacArthur suddenly created a team that included Sirota to draft the new Japanese Constitution, he gave them just eight days to accomplish the task. Colonel Roest said to Beate Sirota, "You're a woman, why don't you write the women's rights section?"; and she seized the opportunity to write into law guarantees of equality unparalleled in the US Constitution to this day.

But this was only one episode in an extraordinary life, and when Gordon died in December 2012, words of grief and praise poured from artists, humanitarians, and thinkers the world over. Illustrated with forty-seven photographs, *The Only Woman in the Room* captures two cultures at a critical moment in history and recounts, after a fifty-year silence, a life lived with purpose and courage. This edition contains a new afterword by Nicole A. Gordon and an elegy by Geoffrey Paul Gordon.

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