

BORN IN JAPAN, SKATER CALLS U.S. HOME

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NAGANO, Japan – She was born in the Land of the Rising Sun, but the light she remembers most sparkled from the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, where her mother took her ice skating as a little girl.

Much of Kyoko Ina's youth was spent discovering who and where she was.

Early this morning she skated in the pairs short program at the Nagano Winter Olympics, a 25-year-old woman comfortable with who and where she is.

She is an American in Japan.

"I'm representing a country I consider my home in the country I was born in," she said before the competition. "It's the best of all worlds."

Of all the stories about cross-cultural ties that pop up at the Olympics – from Japanese-American Kristi Yamaguchi skating against Japanese Midori Ito at the 1992 Albertville Games to Japanese-Canadian Paul Kariya possibly playing hockey in Nagano – none is more tightly knotted than Ina's.

She has lived in both countries.

The three aunts, seven cousins and two nieces who cheered her and partner Jason Dungjen in figure skating's Nagano debut arrived Friday by bullet train from their homes in Tokyo, where Ina's 86-year-old grandmother watched on television. Ina's mother flew in from New York City.

Ina has played for both teams.

As a 14-year-old singles skater she won the 1987 Japanese junior national championship and was eighth in the world. Two years later she was the U.S. junior national champion and was fifth at the '90 junior worlds.

She decided on her own to change nationalities, and the choice was not easy.

It involved more than renouncing half her dual citizenship. It was also about renouncing an athletic heritage deeply entwined with the sports history of the country of her birth, and about the rejection she felt from the Japanese.

Ina's grandfather, Katsuo Okazaki, ran the 5,000 and 10,000 meters for Japan at the 1924 Amsterdam Summer Olympics before beginning a diplomatic career. Ina's grandmother, Shimako, was the first Japanese woman to play tennis at Wimbledon.

Ina's mother, Yoshiko, was born when the Okazakis lived in Washington, D.C., making her a dual citizen.

Yoshiko carried the Okazaki family's sports gene into swimming – she was a breaststroke champion at the Asian Games – and rowing. She spent her first five years in the United States, then moved with her parents through diplomatic assignments in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Calcutta, London and New York.

After the Okazakis returned home to Tokyo in 1965, Yoshiko married Tsuneo Ina, a jewelry importer-exporter, who moved his family to New York's Upper West Side in 1973, six months after Kyoko was born.

Like her mother, Kyoko was a dual citizen.

"I rented skates for Kyoko at Rockefeller Center when she was only 3," Yoshiko said. "Kyoko skated right out into the middle of the ice, but I had to hold the wall. Someone came to me and said, 'This is very rare. She should have lessons.' "

The formal training began a year later in Port Washington, N.Y., and Kyoko's independence began to emerge.

"The reason why she liked the skating is she's away from Mother," Yoshiko said.

When Kyoko progressed to competitive skating, she traveled to Japan two or three times a year to compete.

"My grandfather represented Japan, my grandmother and my mother," Kyoko said, "so to have me represent Japan was in line with tradition. So I just said, 'OK.' "

Problem was, Kyoko didn't have much use for tradition, which means a lot in Japan.

If she wasn't a figure skater, she'd like to be driving a Formula One car, or maybe try NASCAR.

"I'm a lot more free with my expressions," she said. "I dress the way I want to dress. I'm pretty much an independent person as opposed to one who follows a certain way of handling things."

Japan, the nation, is one of the most welcoming and friendly places on earth. But Japan, the club, is impossible to join. Descendants of immigrants several generations past are not considered Japanese by the Japanese even though their passports may be issued in Tokyo. And someone flying in for the national figure skating championships is a foreigner even if she speaks the language fluently and her ancestors competed for the emperor.

"Maybe it was because I didn't accept them," Ina said. "I felt like a foreigner, which I was. I was an American skating for Japan. It was uncomfortable. It was very weird."

In 1988, Ina gave up her Japanese passport for good. The same year, Dungjen lost his skating partner when his sister retired.

Dungjen spent little time on the ice the next four years while he attended college. Ina's and Dungjen's coaches put them together before the 1993 season, and at the 1994 U.S. nationals they finished second behind Jenni Meno and Todd Sand. That won them a trip to the Lillehammer Olympics, where they finished ninth.

In 1997 they beat Meno and Sand for the national championship, and defended the title last month.

That focused the Japanese media's attention on Ina, and she has been giving interviews in Japanese ever since.

Heather Linhart, the U.S. Figure Skating Association's media liaison, said: "Every day I meet her after practice and we go to the (interview area) and I say, 'Kyoko, your fan club's here.' I would say after every practice there's been anywhere from six to seven different (Japanese media) outlets."

Even Dungjen, who has dated 1994 world champion Yuka Sato for the past two years, can toss out a few Japanese phrases when asked.

Tuesday night, perhaps, the Stars and Stripes will be raised over Ina's head as she receives an Olympic medal.

"The Olympics is the best honor anyway," Yoshiko Ina said. "Then it is the country you skate for."

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