



*Alberto  
Fujimori  
of Peru*

**The  
President  
who  
Dared  
to  
Dream**



**Rei Kimura**

## **ALBERTO FUJIMORI OF PERU**

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## CHAPTER 1

It all started in 1920 when a young man called Naoichi Fujimori arrived in Peru to work in a cotton plantation in Paramonga.

His first choice to escape the poverty of his native village, Kumamoto, in Japan had been Hawaii, the place to which his adoptive father, Kintaro Fujimori had migrated earlier. The young Naoichi had begun to think about emigrating in 1919 when Kintaro returned to Japan for a visit, filled with glowing stories about how well the emigrants were faring in their new country.

Naoichi, already frustrated with the inadequacies and lack of opportunities in Kumamoto, needed nothing else to persuade him to follow suit. He dreamed about joining his adoptive father in Hawaii and making the fortune which persistently eluded him and the other restless young men of his generation in Japan.

But unfortunately for Naoichi, it was a time when Hawaii had decided to impose stricter terms to curb the rising flow of Japanese immigrants and Naoichi was unable to pass the stringent medical examination required for emigration to Hawaii.

Having made up his mind to leave Japan, however, he refused to give up his dream and began to search for an alternative emigration path. To further his plans, Naoichi joined the thousands of impoverished but hopeful Japanese who queued up daily to register with the Morioka Immigration Co., which helped settle prospective Japanese immigrants overseas, for a modest fee.

Eventually, Naoichi decided that Peru would be a good choice because two of his brothers were already there, working in the sugar cane and cotton fields of San Nicholas. They had never come back with the glowing reports of Kintaro Fujimori so Naoichi gathered that life in Peru was not as plentiful as in Hawaii. But at least, there would be work for him in this place called Peru and that was all that mattered for the moment, work and opportunities.

And so it was that the 19-year-old Naoichi Fujimori arrived in Peru in 1920 and was assigned to work in Paramonga, some 200 kilometers from Lima. Like many of his compatriots before him, Naoichi had contracted to work in the cotton fields of Paramonga and had come to Peru with the dream that he would achieve phenomenal success and be able to return

to Japan after a few years with the fruits of his labor.

Just like the rest of the early immigrants, Naoichi did not think of Peru as his permanent home at this stage of his life. To him, Peru was just an interim place to work and to dream about becoming rich and never having to worry about money again. Beyond that, Naoichi did not consider Peru as the place he would die in for he was certain he would be returning to Japan as soon as he had made his fortune.

That dream would not be fulfilled because in reality, life in the cotton fields was so harsh that many contract workers like Naoichi eventually broke their contracts and escaped to the towns to look for alternative employment which did not endanger their lives and health with such harsh demands.

Naoichi managed to tolerate the grim conditions in Paramonga for a few years by telling himself that soon his hard life would end and he would be able to return to Japan, far richer than he had been when he left. But eventually, even he could not take life in the cotton fields and decided to move on to Huacho where he started a tailoring business. This seemed a good choice to make a living because like the other Japanese immigrants, Naoichi was extremely skilful with his hands.

But although he did reasonably well in his new business, Naoichi was getting restless. He was well into his thirties by now and knew that it was time for him to marry and start a family. Lately, he had been feeling the loneliness of his Spartan bachelor life more sharply and he did not like that feeling and his meaningless existence.

But marriage was a tricky business because, like the other male immigrants, Naoichi had arrived in Peru, single and this was an era when marriage with a local woman was neither tolerated by the Japanese community nor desired by the men themselves. So began the practice of “picture marriages” in which prospective brides were selected from photographs sent from Japan by relatives or professional “go betweens.”

Naoichi might have been prepared to go through a picture marriage but in the end, this proved to be unnecessary for him. Sometime in 1933, his adoptive father, Kintaro Fujimori, always mindful of his needs, sent Naoichi a letter proposing an arranged marriage with a distant relative from his native Kumamoto. She was Mutsue Inomoto, the 6<sup>th</sup> daughter of Ohagi Fujimori and Toki Inomoto, said to be of good reputation and excellent wife material.

Naoichi readily agreed to this proposal and decided to make the long,

arduous journey back to Japan to meet his prospective bride. Neither of them dreamed that their marriage was to be no ordinary union for together, they would produce a son who was to make great waves in the history of Peru. He would break all the rules of tradition and become president of a country in which, they, as immigrants of less than a hundred years standing, had struggled all their lives just to gain normal acceptance. And, most of all, he would be the savior of the country which had given him and his family shelter when they asked for it.

Mutsue's main reason for agreeing to a marriage which would take her thousands of miles from her homeland was poverty and the desire to lighten the burden of her family. She knew that, at 21 years old and still unmarried, she was a liability to her parents who had other children to fend for.

The marriage ceremony was held in the Fujimori family house in Shirahama, Kumamoto and was attended by 40 to 50 people. Mutsue went through the ceremony with mixed feelings. Part of her was afraid to embark on the long journey to the unknown life that awaited her in Peru and another part, the one that was always looking for new challenges and adventures, was filled with a kind of heady excitement. She had hardly ventured out of her village, much less Japan, and could not imagine what life in Peru would be like.

But it was too late to change her mind and in 1934, the newly weds, Naoichi and Mutsue Fujimori set sail from Yokohama in a ship called the "Bokuyo Maru" together with 90 other people. They would plough across the Pacific Ocean for 45 days passing through Hawaii, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Mexico, Panama, Ecuador and finally arriving in Callao, Peru, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, 1934.

"The passage to Peru cost 400 yen but each immigrant needed to pay only 135 yen. The Japanese government, which was encouraging migration at the time, subsidized the balance," recalls Mutsue Fujimori. "But it was still a princely sum for most people, considering the fact that a primary school teacher in Japan at the time earned only 50 yen a month!"

The young Mutsue Fujimori, a woman of indomitable strength and spirit, nevertheless suffered pangs of fear and anxiety when she thought of the unknown destiny and life that awaited her on the unfamiliar shores of Peru. And when they arrived, she stood on the deck and watched the gangway of the ship being lowered. It was then that the enormity and the irreversibility of what she had done hit her with such great force

that she felt a panic rising up inside her. Japan, her family and all the familiar places and people seemed very far away, as indeed they were. She wondered tearfully when she would ever see them again.

But she had made her choice and she would never turn back. In the decades to come, she would stand by that decision through thick and thin, through all the hardship and pain that awaited her. Eventually when her son, Alberto, became president of Peru, it would all seem unreal to her and she would ask herself over and over again, how had such an achievement been possible?

It had been a hard and perilous journey as their ship tossed and turned in the turbulent Pacific Ocean. Mutsue felt that she would never forget the stench of paint and vomit from the sick and retching passengers in the third class compartment where all the immigrants were packed. Many were brides of picture marriages, being sent to a distant land to live with husbands they had never met. Most had been literally forced into marriages because their poverty stricken families could no longer afford to keep them. They were younger than Mutsue and did not have her fire and her courage. So they sat in the shadowy corners, silently weeping. They had been taught to be self-effacing and never to cause trouble for others, not even in sorrow.

Mutsue told herself that at least she was luckier than her sad traveling companions were because she was going to her new life with her husband beside her, a man she knew and respected in the short time she had known him. Together, they would weather out the storms that lay ahead for she felt inside her that life would not be easy.

And when it was time to disembark, Mutsue lingered on the deck of the big, weary ship, unwilling to leave its safe, familiar shadows. Her lips tightened and her eyes narrowed with the emotions she was trying to suppress. She would be courageous and accept the new country she had chosen to start her married life in. She would not be afraid of the uncertainties of her new life and above all, she would never, never give up. But despite her resolutions, her lips trembled and her hands shook as they rested on the sea washed iron bars of the deck. Suddenly, she wished that she was back in the safe, comforting enclave of her large family and that they were all rich and didn't have to be torn apart like this.

It did not give her comfort to know that her emotions and fears were nothing new for they had been felt by the many thousands of Japanese immigrants who had arrived before her, especially the women. As

their ships landed at the same port of Callao and they took their first tremulous steps on the strange land that they must call home for now, these immigrants had felt exactly as Mutsue did now, the men with their jaws squared and the women blinded by unshed tears.

Callao is a small coastal town about 12 miles from Lima. It was the place where the first ship, *Sakura Maru*, carrying 790 Japanese immigrants landed in 1899 and it would continue to be the landing point for the steady stream of Japanese immigrants into Peru, right up to the arrival of the last immigrant ship in 1941.

Together with the other travel stained immigrants, the Fujimoris were inspected and registered upon arrival on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September, 1934. Afterwards, they were taken by railroad to Huacho, about 200 kilometers from Lima. A light, misty rain had begun to fall as they pulled out of Callao and its gentleness calmed the conflicting emotions that tore at Mutsue as she sat in the crowded compartment, watching the strangely bare, unfamiliar scenery slithering past her. Used to the lush greenery of temperate Japan, she had never seen the brown, arid and dusty landscape of a desert and despite herself, she watched every mile they covered with interest.

Mutsue and Naoichi Fujimori set up home in a small house in Huacho which was also used by Naoichi for his tailoring business. The narrow street, with its quaint little retail shops where they started their married life has stood the ravages of time and today, it remains as it was, fifty years ago with few significant changes. Even Naoichi's tailor shop still stands as it did, only now a Peruvian runs it.

The Fujimoris did not stay in Huacho for long and at the end of three months, Naoichi decided it was time to move to Lima. There, the Fujimori family set up home at 473, Calle Santo Tomas, a stone's throw from the massive and awesome Plaza Bolivar where one day their son, Alberto Fujimori would be installed in Congress as the first President, ever in the history of Peru or any other part of Latin America, to emerge from a minority group of Japanese immigrants. But in 1934, it was a thought and aspiration which could not have been further from the minds of the Fujimori family as they settled down in their humble home on the Calle Santo Tomas. Politicians and presidents in Peru came from the rich and the elite, not from poor uneducated immigrants like them. All they hoped for and aspired to do was to be given the chance to live out their lives in safe, relatively comfortable obscurity until they had amassed enough

wealth to return to Japan.

Their new environment was once again, one of the endless narrow streets crammed with retail shops that characterized the living environment of most of the Japanese immigrant community of the time.

In that house, Mutsue Fujimori gave birth to her first child, Juana, on the 7<sup>th</sup> April, 1935 and in the following year, 1936, Naoichi Fujimori decided to set up a tailoring shop in Lima again.

Although Naoichi was an industrious worker, he was not blessed with good fortune in his business ventures and no matter how hard he worked, he could not succeed. To make matters worse, the 1930s saw a period when Peru was constantly grappling with political turmoil characterized by a strong military presence and things became more precarious for the Japanese community in Peru.

In 1930, when a revolution placed Peru under military control, 30 shops owned by Japanese immigrants were attacked and destroyed. The new military government had to support the unemployed in Peru and to that end, a law was implemented which required at least 80% of the workforce of factories and retail businesses to be Peruvians.

This, together with the policy in 1936, of restricting immigration into Peru, the many business restrictions imposed by the government and the generally hostile mood towards the Japanese, made it a very bad time for the Japanese community's already precarious position in Peru.

With the uncertainties created by such a crisis, Naoichi's tailoring business naturally failed and deeply discouraged, he wandered back into the familiar trade of cotton planting. Tragically, this was to prove another wrong decision and it was responsible for the whole family shifting again, soon after Juana was born. This time the move was to Miraflores, which was near the sea and generally considered a better place for cotton farming.

At the time, cotton was a major industry in Peru and considered a good business choice. Mutsue dreamed that this shift to cotton planting would be an opportunity for them to make sufficient money to eventually return to Japan. Since the cotton industry was thriving, surely, they could not fail in their new venture.

But things would work out differently and their destinies would keep them in Peru, as it turned out, for a purpose. Against all Mutsue's optimism, Naoichi could and did fail again.

In any event, it did not take Naoichi long to start facing difficulties

and the frightening realization that he had, once again, made the wrong business decision. Cotton planting was fraught with risks and uncertainties because the soil had to be rich, the moisture needed to nourish the cotton plants had to be just enough and the temperature had to be just right.

Naoichi and Mutsue soon discovered that they had been fleeced because the soil in the particular field that they had rented was not rich enough for successful cotton planting. They knew they should give it up and move on but they were reluctant to uproot again. So against their better judgement, they tried to hold on to their cotton field, hoping against hope that things would work out for them. But it did not and there was to be no miracle to save them from financial ruin. In the end, when the Fujimoris finally admitted defeat and gave up the cotton field, it had taken three years of their lives and their hard, often painful labor gave them nothing but a mountain of bad debts they would have to work many years to repay.

It was a time of sadness and disappointment for Mutsue and Naoichi. They could not understand why, no matter how hard they toiled, even modest success eluded them and why Naoichi's life would be plagued by one business failure after another. Alberto's childhood and youth would be fraught with memories of his father's toil and the business success that never came his way. Mutsue seldom complained about their hard life but sometimes she would feel the great injustice of a good man like Naoichi struggling so hard to make a living for himself and his family only to be defeated time and time again. Not only did the boy, Alberto, witness his parents' fight against the adversities of life but he saw and never forgot the courageous way they would get up and try again each time they were felled. And he would learn the wisdom and value of emulating that great courage and undefeatable spirit.

In fact, it was during this period of great disillusion that the long awaited son, Alberto, was born on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July, 1938. He brought light to Naoichi and Mutsue's lives and gave them hope. He was delivered at 9.00 PM by a midwife from Kumamoto called Nakajima and they called him Kenya after Mutsue's brother who had died of dysentery in childhood.

Alberto's birth coincided with the Peruvian Independence Day, 28<sup>th</sup> of July and his parents regarded that as an auspicious omen. They were right, for the boy would grow up to achieve a fame and recognition for

himself, his family and the whole Japanese community, that was way beyond their wildest dreams and aspirations.

Less than a month after Alberto's birth, in a bid to cut their losses and start their lives afresh, Naoichi and Mutsue gave up the failed cotton field and moved back to Lima. They set up home at No. 526, Avenida Grau which was the fourth of a row of five terrace houses opening right out onto the street. Everyday, their house would be filled, not only with the dust kicked up by the passing vehicles outside, but also with the rich, exciting sounds of the street life bustling all around them.

In the house at Avenida Grau, Naoichi started a tire repairing business. His decision was motivated by the logical deduction that since Peruvians seldom changed the tires of their vehicles, they would certainly need the services of a tire repairer.

For once, he was right and for sometime, this new business gave the family a modest income, and life, even though humble, was at least as stable and tranquil as the presence of their two growing children would allow. It was in the house at Avenida Grau that their third child, Pedro, was born on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 1940.

The peace did not last long and turned out to be just the lull before the real storm. Just before Pedro was born, the dreaded anti Japanese sentiments started brewing again. This culminated in racial riots and when a Peruvian lady was killed, it sparked off intensified violence and anger. Enraged Peruvians took to the streets, hurling stones and attacking Japanese owned shops. There was nothing the Japanese immigrant community could do but to protect themselves as best as they could and wait for this storm of rage and violence to blow over.

This time, for once, luck was on Naoichi and Mutsue's side because the anti Japanese activists targeted only the bigger shops. Their tire repair shop, being too small and humble, was thus able to escape, unharmed.

Then on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, 1940, Lima and Callao were, without warning, rocked by an earthquake of such magnitude that terrified Peruvians began to wonder whether it was retribution for their senseless victimization of the Japanese community. In the end, unlikely as it seemed, it was this natural disaster that brought Peruvians to their senses and put a stop to the anti Japanese hostilities. Thus, the spate of racial violence died down as suddenly as it had started and every Japanese, including the Fujimoris, could sleep again without fear of the dreaded hammering on their front doors.