Gerry Curtis (Class of 1964–65)

I don’t recall exactly when I first met Ken Butler, but it probably was at a Center party shortly after he became Director. I had graduated a few years earlier and I remember how delighted I was that someone so committed to language training and prepared to stay on as Director for more than a couple of years had taken charge. Ken invited me to visit him in his mountain retreat in Gumma sometime in the early seventies. The area was so beautiful and the village so full of interesting people that I ended up building a small house right near Ken’s and for many years made that my base when living in Japan. I’d see Ken often when I was up there until he sold the house and moved to Yokohama. We would get together in the evening for some serious drinking and conversation. Invariably the conversation would come around to the Center, how to improve language teaching, what Center students who had graduated were doing, and what could be done to get the Center a secure financial base. Ken was devoted to his wife and daughter and he was also devoted to the Center. For him it was more a calling than a job. Ken left the Center in 1977 after being Director for ten years but he could not just put it behind him. Every time we met he would talk about the Center and his hopes for it. He accepted an invitation to be Director again in the mid-1990s and pretty much stayed with the Center until near the end of his life.

Ken Butler was a wonderful man, a fine linguist, and a talented administrator. The Center would not have become the preeminent institution that it is without him. I am fortunate that I was able to know him and count him as a friend.

The most important thing we can do to honor his memory is to do all in our power to make sure that the Center continues to thrive.

Richard Wallace (Class of 1970–71)

I always thought it was a remarkable story that a kid from Casper, Wyoming learned classical Japanese, studied the Heike Monogatari, made a life in Japan, and helped all manner of people in their respective personal quests to learn about Japan and put that knowledge to use. He should definitely be remembered for the man he was, the things he did and the lives he affected. I was saddened to learn of his passing.

Ted Cook (Class of 1971–72)

“If you do well, we at Princeton will pick up your tuition,” was the way Professor Marius B. Jansen told me the terms under which I would be allowed to attend the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies in Tokyo. It was our last meeting in the spring of 1971 before I headed off to Japan, on my own initiative, to try to bring my Japanese language up to the level that my ambition to pursue the study of the country’s history required. I’d been accepted to Princeton after an M.A. in Far Eastern Studies at the University of London. I had been taught by W. G. Beasley, Ian Nish, Richard Sims, and Charles Dunn, but aside from a summer of language at Harvard and a single crash semester at Princeton, I was language-less.

Arrival at the Kojimachi Kaikan in September was a revelation. Never had I been given the opportunity to work with such dedicated teachers—Ōtsubo, Takagi, the Mizu-
tanis—nor had I ever been so clearly over my head amid classmates who had specialized in Japanese for years and who far surpassed me in both formal and practical experience. All I really had was a need to succeed, plus the financial “incentive” MBJ had provided.

That is when Kenneth Butler, the Director, whom I held in a kind of awe from having read his work on Japanese literature, called me into his office. No doubt he had observed himself, and also had been informed by the instructors, that I was struggling. He smiled broadly and offered me a few words of advice: “You didn’t become an idiot when you started to study Japanese. Everything you know, you still do. You just don’t yet have the words for it. Everything you want to learn, you can, but you’ll now want to have it in Japanese too. It’s really not that difficult.” Such a simple credo, yet for me, the golden key to see language as both tool and means, and not something divorced from who I am.

Dr. Butler’s willingness to step into my life with help gave me both the courage and the excitement to overcome my momentary doubts and keep on with the real work of the language. It also turned me in the direction my research would eventually take—listening, asking, seeking out lives and experiences from people who had experienced war and life in modern Japan. I would take that path with my then fiancée Haruko Taya—we were married October 29, during that first term at IUC, prompting a few comments like “that was pretty fast”—but without the few words from the man in charge, willing to engage on a most human level, I believe I might never have completed the year, returned to Princeton and my scholarship, and eventually earned that PhD. I might not have had a career in a field I have come to love. Thank you Ken.

David Livdahl (Class of 1973–74)

My relationship with Ken Butler consisted of two parts. The first was the year I spent in one of the “less advanced” classes of four at the IUC in the Nōken (Agriculture Research Institute) Building. Our juvenile sense of humor enjoyed it very much when an expensive hair salon just across the street from the “No Ken” building opened shop with the name “Yes George.”

The second stage of my relationship started after my Center years, first in California, where I tried to provide business advice and contacts for Ken when he visited LA in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when he was trying to develop the hardware and software for self-instruction program kits in Japanese for foreigners. Ken and I became friends after that, and we would get together in Tokyo from time to time for lunch or dinner. I also visited the Center once or twice after it moved to Yokohama.

Ken later told me that although the class I was assigned to at the Center in 1973–74 may not have set any records for test scores or developing serious mainstream scholars of Japan, he enjoyed the likes of Tracy Dahlby and me and hadn’t been upset that it appeared very unlikely that we were bound for successful careers in academia (that is probably putting it very diplomatically).

For me, Ken was the “glue” for the Center. He somehow made a wide variety of students feel at home and welcome there. His dedication to his teachers and students was admirable, and I am very proud of his friendship in the years after my time as a student at the Center.

Tracy Dahlby (Class of 1973–74)

When I was 23 and studying at the Nihon Kenkyu Center in 1973–74, Ken Butler had a way of looking at me with shrewd eyes in that craggy, three-times-around-the-block face of his and I knew HE KNEW exactly what I was thinking. Instead of reprimanding me for not exactly keeping my nose to the grindstone at all times, though, he just smiled and nodded his head. And in such moments, I got the distinct impression that Ken might once have been 23 himself. Ken was a surpassing linguist, an innovative administrator, a Japan hand’s Japan hand, a Wyoming poet by way of the World of the Shining Prince—but above all Ken was a mensch. A great many of us, his former students, owe him a great deal for having the inveterate teacher’s faith that, armed with
the fundamentals of Japanese vocabulary and syntax, we would eventually find our way in the world. And for that we owe him our enduring thanks and respect.

Aoki Soichi (Faculty member since 1989, Associate Director since 1999)

Last fall when I heard that Dr. Butler had passed away, I could hardly believe it. It had been only a year since he retired. I was deeply saddened. As I thought back on the time since I first met him in 1995, I felt renewed appreciation and gratitude for the great many things he had taught me. And not only in the professional sphere, but also in the personal, I had enjoyed his company—he was the guest of honor at my wedding, for example.

The years 2008 and 2009, immediately after he retired, were particularly difficult for me. A search for a successor to Dr. Butler as resident director of the IUC had ended inconclusively, and I was appointed acting director. Just as I became immersed in my new responsibilities, my father became seriously ill, and at the end of 2008, he died. Then, as I was making preparations for my father’s funeral, I heard the sad news that Ōtsubo-sensei, a former IUC faculty member who had mentored me in Japanese language pedagogy, had passed away. And then last October, Dr. Butler. All this made me realize that in human life, there are times when very big changes occur suddenly and simultaneously.

When Dr. Butler arrived at the IUC to take the director’s position for a second time in 1995, I had just become the program coordinator for the first time. From then on, he and I met almost daily to discuss the curriculum. In fact—although I say “discuss,” that is putting it mildly—and I remember we were fairly often just one step shy of real argument. In those days—or maybe I should say then even more than now—I was inclined to be a little pushy, and as everyone knows, the always passionate Dr. Butler could be pretty obstinate. It wasn’t rare for us to go at it quite heatedly. Never, however, I realize as I reflect on it now, did bad feeling from these arguments last. As soon as we finished debating each other, our relationship became good again. The important point that I want to make here, as I recall these debates, is that our discussions were extremely
productive and led to improvements in the IUC instructional program.

By 2003, when Dr. Butler came back to the Center for a third stint as director, he was no longer in good health, and the IUC itself faced uncommonly severe circumstances. All this weighed heavily on him, and I think his feelings from that time on were very complicated. For him, there was nothing else in the world as important as the IUC. He had devoted his full energies to its creation and continuation. Precisely because of this, I imagine, while he very strongly desired the Center to go on, he seemed to have the sense that it was he who had made the IUC what it was, and that without his own presence in the future, the IUC could not continue.

With due, and true, respect for Dr. Butler, I wish to differ from him on the point of the second feeling that I attribute to him (that the Center could not survive without him). As a result of his efforts, there are a great many individuals and organizations that support the IUC. Thanks to him, the Center itself has grown into a fine educational institution. Drawing on the strength of our alumni, friends, and consortium member universities, and combining that strength with the efforts of our faculty and staff, we are maintaining the IUC today, and I feel that we can develop it still more in the future. With this resolve to continue his legacy, I conclude these remarks. To Dr. Butler: For all you did and all you were, thank you.

Contributors: Gerald R. Curtis is Burgess Professor of Political Science, Columbia University; Richard Wallace is General Counsel, USHIO America, Inc.; Theodore F. Cook is Professor of History and Director of Asian Studies, William Paterson University; Tracy Dahlby is Frank A. Bennack Jr. Chair in Journalism and Director, School of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin; David A. Livdahl is Partner and Chief Representative, Beijing Office, Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP; Soichi Aoki is Associate Director and Professor at the IUC.

**Kenneth D. Butler**

*Abbreviated curriculum vitae*

Born 1930, Oregon, U.S.A.

**Education**
B.A., University of Chicago, 1957, with honors; major: classical Chinese
M.A., Harvard University, 1958; specialization: 19th-century China
Ph.D., Harvard University, 1958; specialization: Far Eastern Languages

**Major fellowship**
1960–63, Fulbright Research Fellow, University of Tokyo

**Employment**
1950–54, U.S. Navy, computer and radar technician
1963–67, Assistant Professor of Japanese, Yale University

**Selected publications**

**MEMORIAL FUND**

A fund has been established in Ken Butler’s honor, dedicated for use by the IUC in Japan. Contributions may be sent to our Stanford office (Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies, Encina Hall, Room E009, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-6055). Checks should be made payable to “IUC/Kenneth Butler Memorial Fund.”

At the party in 2001 commemorating his “retirement” from the IUC after his second term as Director, Ken Butler is surrounded by former faculty and staff members at the International House of Japan, Tokyo.