

Justice Minister's Award

My Grandpa at Hoshizuka

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“Call me Grandpa at Hoshizuka.” I was really happy to hear this from him, who had once said to me, “You’d better not touch me,” and refused to shake hands with me. I thought we became a real family.

I have a lovable Grandpa, who is very much fond of Hello Kitty and Hanshin Tigers (Japanese pro baseball team). He is not my biological grandfather, but he is a wonderful person, and I feel a close bond with him. I am always looking forward to seeing him annually. The place he lives in is National Sanatorium Hoshizuka Keiaien in Kagoshima Prefecture. Yes, he is a former leprosy sufferer, who was deprived of his family, hometown, the freedom to choose the life he wanted to live, and all other things by the government's cruel policy.

Leprosy, also called Hansen's disease, is a disease caused by contracting *Mycobacterium leprae*. The infectivity is very low, so people in modern-day Japan are rarely infected with it and develop the disease. However, in the days when neither effective medical treatment nor curative medicine was available, disfigurement of the face and fingers appeared as symptoms, which scared people away. It was believed that there was no other way than to isolate leprosy patients in order to prevent infection. The Japanese government, under the 1931 Leprosy Prevention Law, implemented a policy of forcibly placing patients in sanatoria for Hansen's disease and segregating them from the outside world for the rest of their lives. On top of that, the government infused people's minds with the wrong perception that leprosy was an abominable and incurable disease, by sterilizing the patients to ensure that they didn't have children, sanitizing their houses after they left, and launching Leprosy-Free Prefecture Campaigns. Because of this policy, leprosy patients and families have long suffered extreme prejudice and severe discrimination even after curative medicine was developed and the disease was proved to be curable. Moreover, it was only in 1996 that this policy ended. That is not such a long time ago. Having said that, I myself had been ignorant about these facts until I met Grandpa.

It was five years ago that I came to know about leprosy. That was when I participated in the Hansen's disease sanatorium visit program for exchange and communication organized by Miyazaki Prefecture. It was a program to visit a national sanatorium in Kagoshima and learn about leprosy correctly. The group of participants were given lectures at the sanatorium, and after that, my family and I met a person who was to relate his experience to us. This was my first encounter with Grandpa. Honestly speaking, the first time I saw him, I could not utter a word. He had an artificial eye, his hands had skin lesions, and he had no fingers. He also seemed a little angry with an air of refusing to open a casual conversation, which made me all the more nervous, and I did not know what to talk about. Even so, I wanted at least to make friends with him and offered my hand for a handshake just before I left the sanatorium. But then, he pulled his hand away reflexively, saying to me, “You’d better not touch me.” This aroused sad, painful, and mixed feelings in me. Why? His disease has already been cured, then, why did he refuse? I gave it some thought for a while and realized that the horrible prejudice and discrimination he had suffered had hurt him deeply, and this trauma was reflected in his actions.

My family and I understood his trauma, which made us want to know more about his life, and decided to visit him as a particular individual, not as someone who was a former leprosy sufferer. When we saw him for the second time, we spent an amiable time listening to him tell us about the past history of the disease, singing songs together, and taking a walk together.

Since then, we have visited Grandpa annually, as if we go back to our hometown during the New Year's holidays, where my grandfather and grandmother are waiting.

Grandpa has a tendency by nature to avoid communication with others and did not like being photographed. But, while interacting with us, he gradually opened up his heart. Now he exchanges letters and phone calls with us and has no problem being photographed with us. He even framed the photos. When I took my junior high school entrance exam, he was the one who prayed for my success most earnestly. For these reasons, I was overwhelmingly happy when I heard him say, "Call me Grandpa at Hoshizuka." This convinced me that he cared about us as if we were his own children and grandchildren and trusted us enough to shake hands without worry.

The wounds in his heart caused by his harsh experiences would never be healed completely. He cannot get back his family or the time he lost, but by visiting him over and over again, I want to help him spend more time with laughter for the rest of his life. It will be a wonderful, treasured time for me and my family, too. We want to expand the delight he gave me to a bigger one and keep on giving it back to him.

Grandpa, from the bottom of my heart, I am grateful that I met you.