

Justice Minister's Award

Passing down the memories of the war to the next generation

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“You...old man who has failed to die!”

In May of this year, these words were shouted at a story-teller who survived the atomic bomb by junior high school students during a study tour guided by him while they were on a school trip. I could never understand how anyone could voice such heartless words.

I have a great-grandfather who went to war. During the war he sustained severe injuries and was able to return to Japan. I decided to ask him to tell his story of the war, since I thought, by learning more about the war, I might be able to accept in myself those who experienced the war.

Born in 1918, my great-grandfather is now 96 years old. In July 1939, during the Second Sino-Japanese War, he received a draft card, so-called “akagami”, and joined the Army’s air force information corps in Tachiarai. Entering his second year of married life, he and his wife were expecting a baby, the first-born boy—my grandfather. To my great surprise, I learned that my great-grandfather had been on active service in the field for as long as six years until the end of the war. He performed his duties in China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Burma (present Myanmar). As soon as he detected enemy aircraft, he transmitted telegraph messages to the ground as a member of air force information corps. Since enemy airplanes were heavy in the air, he was very busy every day. He carried out his duties in the presence of the fear the aircrafts might be shot down. One day, when he was at an airfield in Burma, a bomb was dropped near him. He suffered severe injuries to his head and hand in the blast. The blast was so powerful that it lifted the entire body of a man off the ground. The painful scars still remain on my great-grandfather’s face and the back of his hand. He talked me not only about the fearful and sad experiences that he went through, but also about the brightly colored banana and pineapple fields and the egg-laying behavior of sea turtles that he saw in the Asian countries. These small things must have given him some strength and anchorage in days of hardship. When telling his story, he talked little about how he felt in those days. However, the frown that appeared occasionally on his face while talking showed the extraordinary pain and horror the war had inflicted on him. Another sight that stands out in his memory was a wall drawing that he saw when he was talking with local people. The drawing depicted a man who resembled Urashima Taro¹. Idly wondering if the turtle Urashima Taro mounted to the bottom of the sea was a turtle from Burma, he often thought about on Japan from the

¹ A character in a famous Japanese fairy tale. According to the tale, the fisherman rescued a turtle and hitched a ride on the back of the turtle to an underwater palace.

far-away land. I supposed that he was hoping the war would end soon, and that he would be able to return to Japan.

In May 1946, the year after the end of the war, my great-grandfather returned to Japan. He felt deeply perplexed, since more than a dozen young men in his neighborhood had been killed in the war. Standing alone at the side of the path to his village and looking over the hamlet, he wondered what kind of face he should have as he returned home. As he had expected, the community received him with frosty eyes.

“Fortunately I was able to come back.” After saying these words to them when he went back home, he did not speak very much. This episode broke my heart. This made me realize that a war could take away even the warm bonds of a community and the close ties of family.

As the last question for my great-grandfather in this session, I had planned to ask him what he thought about the alarmingly abusive remarks, “failed to die”, toward the story-teller. However, I changed my mind. By hearing his stories, I became sure that he would never be a person who has “failed to die.” He is an admirable person, since he survived the horrible war and continued to suffer hardship. We owe Japan’s peace today to those who endured such hardship and struggle, and those who had to lose their precious lives in the war. I asked him, instead,

“Do you have any message for us ?”

He said,

“We should never engage in war.”

I felt that the weight of these words could be considered to be the weight of life.

I am really glad that I was able to hear the stories from my great-grandfather. Nearly seventy years after the end of the war, the number of those who have experienced the war has decreased. There are many of us, a generation that has not experienced war, are indifferent to war, or seem to have a misunderstanding of war. I had an opportunity to hear wartime memories from my great-grandfather, someone very close to me. This experience has enhanced my awareness of peace and war, and helped me become a person who can convey the silliness of war to the next generation. If it was not for people who told their stories of wars, Japan could have been involved in war again. Do you still execrate those people who are working to pass on the memories of the war to younger generations as “having failed to die”? Passing down such memories is the first major step toward creating and preserving a peaceful world. We need to ponder, understand, and bear in mind the preciousness of peace and life, which is being forgotten now.

My great-grandfather’s message “We should never engage in war” impressed me strongly.