

特別賞/日米協会会長賞

小田島 誠慈さん 筑波大学附属坂戸高等学校 3 年

埼玉県

過酷なシベリア抑留生活の中でも、現地の人たちとの心のふれあいを通して生きる希望を見出した抑留者たちがいました。どんなに苦しい中にあっても、心と心の交流を守り抜くことが平和の礎になると気づかされました。

Heart-to-Heart Connections

“There is no greater treasure than peace.”

A 100-year-old survivor of the Siberian Internment told me this with deep conviction. I still cannot forget the warmth of his hand as he gently placed it on my shoulder.

Since last spring, I have been conducting a research project focused on “the Siberian Internment.” My interest began with the discovery that my great-grandfather was detained in Siberia.

He was in Manchuria when the war ended on August 15, 1945. There, many people, including him, were detained by Soviet forces advancing into Manchuria. Believing in the word “damoi” (Russian for “return home”), they boarded Soviet military freight trains. However, that turned out to be a lie. The trains did not head for a port bound for Japan, but instead for forced-labor camps. Approximately 600,000 people were deported to various regions of the Soviet Union and Mongolia, and roughly 60,000 lost their lives. It was the event commonly referred to as “the Siberian Internment.” August 1945, which marked the end of the war for many people, was not the end for those detained in Siberia, but rather the beginning of a new kind of battle for survival.

Those detained the longest were forced to remain in detention for as long as 11 years. The detainees had to work in the harsh cold, suffering from hunger. In these brutal conditions, many of them lost their strength and their lives. At the beginning of their detention, they shared the same hope of returning to Japan and helped each other. However, while being mistreated by Soviet forces, they also suffered from betrayal by their fellow Japanese. As a result, they gradually found it difficult to trust others and began to think only of themselves. Many survivors who returned to Japan have left their testimonies. These testimonies describe their deep sadness and resentment over having their precious youth taken away. I was speechless when I read their testimonies. Through them, I learned how deeply harsh living conditions can hurt people’s spirits when human lives are treated as unimportant and people are forced to distance themselves from others.

However, even in such harsh conditions in the camps, I was deeply moved by the testimonies of detainees who experienced being respected as human beings and warm human connections.

“Your father and mother are in Japan, right? You must not die in a place like this.”¹

Some local people comforted and encouraged the detainees with kind words, even shedding tears with them. They also gave them food and drinks.

“I lost my family in the war. Your family must be waiting for you in Japan. So, I’m so glad that you can return to Japan alive.”²

At that time, there were many people in the Soviet Union who had lost their families in the war and did not even have enough food for themselves. Even so, there were people who treated the detainees as human beings and cared for them and their families in Japan as if they were their own families. Meeting such people gave the detainees hope to survive.

Although the survivors who shared such heartfelt connections across national borders had different experiences, many expressed gratitude, writing that these encounters helped them survive. Many also wrote of their hopes for peace.

I am currently writing a research paper for my graduation project on “Heart-to-Heart Connections in the Testimonies of Survivors of the Siberian Internment.” Some people maintained their humanity and experienced warm human interactions even in harsh conditions. I want to share their words with many people who have not experienced war themselves.

Japan is not at war today, and I feel fortunate to live in such a country. But can we really say that our society is peaceful simply because we are not fighting with weapons? Through this research, I have come to believe that peace means building a society where people respect each other.

Now, thanks to this project, I am connecting with people across generations and national borders who commemorate the victims and seek to pass on the experiences of detainees. We share a strong hope for peace and are encouraged to see these deep and warm heart-to-heart connections continue to grow and spread.

¹ Association for Recording the Experiences of Japanese Prisoners of War in the Soviet Union (2009), "64 Years After the War: Voices of Detainees in Siberia and Mongolia," *Aurora*, nos. 42-43 (combined issue), pp. 73, 85.

² Public Foundation for Peace and Consolation (1991), "Foundations of Peace," vol. 1, pp. 200-201.