

Prime Minister's Award

“Living with a Humane Heart”

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This summer marking 70 years since the end of the Second World War was characterized by record-breaking heat that tormented the entire nation. What was the summer like, in 70 years ago? In the summer that saw the end of the war, people must have suffered emotionally and physically, not only from the heat but also from deep grief. I would like to explore the topic of basic human rights from the tragedy that is war.

Every year when summer rolls around, my 89-year-old grandmother with whom I live starts to recount her sad memories. She has progressive dementia and can hardly remember new information, yet speaks matter-of-factly about the things that happened over 70 years ago in remarkable detail. Each and every story is sad, and weighs down on my heart. And every year as I listen, I feel my sorrow and fear gradually grow inside of me.

My grandmother was born in the city of Fushun in Manchuria, China. My great grandfather worked for the South Manchuria Railway Company, where he managed a division responsible for recruiting and placing foreign laborers. According to my grandmother, the family lived comfortably in company housing for executives in a safe and pleasant environment. My great grandfather worked with Chinese and Russian employees at the office; he also had a few Foreign helpers to perform domestic chores around the house. At the time, a majority of the foreign workers employed by the South Manchuria Railway Company were forced to work under harsh conditions to make a living, and the stark contrast in living standards between Japanese and foreign employees was evident even to a child's eye.

Such was the life at the time, but my great grandfather, a compassionate, honest man, was always willing to share the ample food and other supplies with all those around him, regardless of their positions or nationality. He was keen to help improve the lives of the people who worked for him and their families, giving away food and clothes, and sometimes making arrangements to have medicine delivered. My grandmother says she was so proud of her father, who treated people fairly and tried to give everyone equal chance to live a good life. And when the war ended, this attitude of my great grandfather's played a role in saving my grandmother's large family.

Because my great grandfather was in a senior position at the railway company, it took a long time for my grandmother and her family to return to Japan after the war. So horrific were the days leading up to their departure—they didn't think they would make it back alive—that to this day, my grandmother cannot bring herself to tell the whole story. The Chinese and Russians who used to live side by side with them were now their enemies, inflicting great pain on the family. Having witnessed looting, kidnapping, murder, and all sorts of cruel, inhuman acts, my grandmother was struck by how much a war can change people, and developed complicated emotions that went beyond sadness or fear.

Amid the harrowing circumstances, however, it was the Chinese people who had long worked in the family's house that came to their rescue. They quietly supported the family now living under danger, bringing food and taking care of them until their eventual return to Japan, risking their own lives by doing this. At the end, they helped the whole family—not missing a single member—make the long journey to the port and boarded them safely on the repatriation ship. I believe that my great grandfather's attitude touched the lives of people around him and developed in them a humane heart that is so valuable to us as people. Had he been unjust or interested only in his own welfare in the earlier years, no one would have bothered to lend him a helping hand, and I would never have existed.

This episode, one that includes numerous incidents of human rights violations, tells me that my grandmother knows, from first-hand experience, the value of respecting the basic human rights. Every time I listen to her stories, I reaffirm my belief that respecting human rights means to treat others fairly regardless of their positions or nationalities at any and all times, just as my great grandfather did. For us to live a life with a humane heart, it is important that we remember and put this insight into practice in our daily lives, starting with how we treat the people closest to us. Wars are a tragedy and accomplish nothing. Still, I now realize that simply by listening to my grandmother's experience, I have learned a great many things. At the same time, I have a growing sense that I must be there for my grandmother to support her, who went through such hardships.

Seventy years ago, she was nineteen years old. She has never known a happy, carefree youth, but instead my grandmother learned to be strong, to live with perseverance. And following in my great grandfather's footsteps, she would always treat people with courtesy and fairness, and tried to help as many people as possible live a full, dignified life.

Her illness has progressed to such an extent these days that she has lost the resilience and the strength she used to have. Her days and nights are reversed, and to strangers she

would be nothing but a broken old lady who behaves in a strange way, telling the same story over and over again. In the beginning, I myself was unprepared and perplexed as to how to deal with this behavior, and sometimes I would just look the other way. As I watched my mother take care of her around the clock, however, I came to understand how to talk to her and what I can do to help. I have realized that as her family, my duty is to accept her increasingly fractured mind and her needs, and to continue to respect her as a human being until the very end. Today I will listen to her story again, one I have already heard before, and I'm going to respond cheerfully as she talks, praying that sadness, even just a little, will disappear from her memories, the memories that are slipping away one by one. I'm going to take her hand and lead the way with a warm heart. And I hope to implant in my grandmother's memory many images of my smiling face.