

Japan, look straight into the history, please | Dutch view on Japan

By Maki Okubo, senior staff writer, 4 July 2014

(photo) Demonstration takes place every 2nd Tuesday of a month in front of the Japanese Embassy, The Hague. Demonstrators sing hymns before finishing demonstration.
(photo by Maki Okubo)

The number of the Dutch people who view Japan with alert is increasing. To begin with, there are not small number of people with anti Japan sentiment in this country. During the Pacific War, Japan occupied the former Dutch East Indies, and forced POWs to do labor, interned civilians, forced women to work as prostitutes. Now it has been 69 years since the capitulation. Although 2 countries have been trying to reconcile, yet a doubt has been born when Japanese government started re-evaluating the Kono Statement.

* Sudden “Konoyaro” and “Bakayaro”

The Hague, located southwest of Holland, at the North Sea shore. In the rain, Arthur Leonard van Maaseveen (88 years old) arrived at the Japanese Embassy with his bicycle. When I introduced myself to him, “I am a journalist from Japan,” he suddenly shouted

“Konoyaro (Curse you!)” “Bakayaro (You idiot!)” then “Ichi, Ni, San. (1, 2, 3)” I watched him with my mouth open, then he looked at me with his large eyes, grinned and said in Dutch “These are some Japanese words I remember.” He was born in Indonesia and was interned by the Japanese Army there. He was 17 years old. He cannot forget the words he heard when he was beaten up. Ex-POWs and ex-civic detainees in their 70s to 80s of age were gathering in front of the embassy building. Van Maaseveen raised a banner written in English.

“There would have been no Hiroshima without Pearl Harbor”

“The atomic bomb saved my life”

20 years ago, Dutch ex POWs sued Japanese government asking for compensation, and since then, they have been regularly demonstrating in front of the Japanese Embassy. The organizer of the demonstration is Stichting JES, who is asking Japanese government for the official apology and compensation for what they have done during the war. They gather every 2nd Tuesdays, demonstrate for almost 1 hour with banners, and the representative submits the letter of appeal to the ambassador. They sing hymns and adjourn. When I was there, there were about 50 demonstrators.

Van Maaseveen told me that he was only given thin porridge as food in the camp, and his father died of starvation. He said, “Nazi killed with gas, Japanese Army killed with starvation. What most problematic is that Japan denies what really happened, such as the comfort women. Japan should recognize their wrong doings.” His words were strong.

A tall lady approached me. She was Elizabeth Vissel (79 years old). “I blame on Japan,” she started talking. Her father was interned as a POW, and she, her mother and older sister were also interned for 3 years. When they were liberated, she was 10 years old, weighing only 18kg. Her mother weighed 38kg. “It is not money I am asking for. The only wish of mine is that the Japanese ambassador comes out here and bows for us, just as we had to bow 90 degrees to the direction of the Emperor every morning in the camp.”

* “I no longer blame, yet...”

Even someone who believes that war compensation issue is concluded politically with the signing of Treaty of San Francisco, he views today’s Japan with suspect.

Felix Bakker (88 years old) lives in the northern part of the Netherlands. He joined the army in Indonesia, where he was born, and became POW when he was 16 years old. In the prison, he got “binta (hitting) if he failed to bow. He had to witness 5 POWs had to dig a hole and were executed by shooting, and buried in the hole. Later, he had to do forced labor building the Thai Burma Railway.

That was a railway Japanese Army built from 1942 June to 1943 October, to make transport root. More than 60000 European POWs and more than 200000 Asian Romusha were forced to work, and it is said that more than 100000 lost their lives. The railway became the setting for the movie “The Bridge on The River Kwai.” Bakker suffered from malnutrition, malaria, and buruli ulcer, but he could somehow survive.

After the war, he blamed on Japan for a while. However, in his 50s, when he was working as a tour leader and visited Japan and other Asian countries, changes came to his mind. He wondered why Japanese were so cruel. Through studying the history and culture, he learned that Japanese were given the idea; to die in battle is an honor. Brainwash of youth could happen in any country.

He has been giving talks on his wartime experiences at local schools. He was always asked, “You do not hate Japanese?” “I no longer hate them. Hate only creates hate. Japanese people are human just as we are. There are good people and bad ones too,” so he answers. However, Bakker rejects, “I cannot understand it at all.” He finds it difficult to understand why Japanese politicians try to deny repeatedly the inconvenient truths that happened during the past war. “History is the truth. It is important to know and pass on the stories. Japanese politicians are not clever. Human beings and nations can make mistakes. It is to be ashamed, but what is most important is not to repeat the mistakes.”

A man (62 years old) whose mother was a comfort woman, says “My father had been through difficult experiences as a POW. Both of my parents carried traumas and us, the children also had to suffer for a long time under their influence. We hated Japan.” Yet, he came to understand the essence of war through learning and he continued “We might have done the same what Japanese did, if we were under the same circumstance.” Although he told so, he feels objection against Japan’s recent movement to rewrite the history. “Japan must recognize what they have done.”

* Warning Bell “We need to look straight into the past”

Takamitsu Muraoka, an honorary professor of the University of Leiden, who has been living in the Netherlands for over 20 years, established the “Dialogue the Netherlands Japan” in 2000. He has been working on offering opportunities for both Dutch people from Indonesia and Japanese living in the Netherlands to listen to each other, dialogues for the mutual understanding on the Pacific War and the postwar history.

In April, a critical essay by a known journalist was featured by one of the major Dutch paper. The title was “Japan against the world.” It was criticizing the movement of the Abe (Shinzo) administration such as re-evaluation of the Kono Statement.

Muraoka says, “It was featured on one whole page. We should understand that the Netherlands are basically critical towards Japan.” “It seems to me that Japan is still in the state of Sakoku (isolation from other nations). I am afraid Japan has no idea what other countries think of her.”

As a result, Japanese government concluded that it would not re-evaluate the Kono Statement. Muraoka points out “The way to win the trust from the world is to remember the historical truths, make a sincere effort to reflect them, keep an attitude to educate the young generation with past truthfully.” He warns, “If we do not look straight into the past, especially when there is a sign of pressure from the government to the education, we might repeat the past.

Maki Okubo, senior staff writer

* Japanese occupation of Indonesia*

From 1942 to 1945, Japanese Imperial Army occupied the former Dutch East Indies. According to the Dutch government, about 40000 people were interned as Prisoners of War, and about 90000 civilians were forcibly interned in camps. POW's were pulled into the forced labor, and there were women who had to become comfort women. More than 20000 people lost their lives due to malnutrition and diseases in the camps. After Japan's capitulation, during the war of independence in Indonesia, around 300000 Dutch-Indonesians repatriated to the Netherlands.