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Nobumasa Tanaka

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Translated by Steve Rabson

Bereaved families from Korea and Taiwan earlier filed lawsuits in Tokyo and Osaka seeking to end their relatives' enshrinement at Yasukuni, raising a central issue in the storm of controversy surrounding the shrine. Filed in Naha District Court on March 19, the Okinawa litigation challenges Yasukuni's application of the Law for Protection of War Victims and Bereaved Families to perpetuate enshrinements that distort the truth about the Battle of Okinawa.

Five plaintiffs are opposing the enshrinement of ten of their relatives who died in the war, two in the Western and South Pacific, and eight in the Battle of Okinawa. One plaintiff lost four family members, both parents, an older sister, and a younger brother. What all of them have in common is that they can no longer bear to have their relatives, whose lives were taken cruelly and senselessly, fraudulently recast as "heroic spirits who died for the nation" and labeled as "gods." As residents of Okinawa, where state militarization is a daily reality, they also worry that the government could exploit their relatives again as "enshrined spirits of war heroes."



Plaintiffs in the suit at a news conference

Families forced out of their battle shelters by the Japanese military

Plaintiff Sakihara Seishu (born 1933) left Okinawa in 1942 during his summer vacation in the third grade to live with his aunt and uncle in Kishiwada City, Osaka Prefecture. Three years later he was in the sixth grade at the time of Japan's defeat when he heard of Okinawa's devastation. He knew that his father had died of illness in 1944, but had no idea what had happened to his mother, brother, and sisters. He was resigned to the likelihood they had died, but, as a child and with Okinawa so far away, there was nothing he could do.

Finally, in late 1946, he returned with his aunt and uncle to Nishihara Village in Okinawa. There he learned that his mother Uto was dead, and that his elder brother Seihan, who had gone to work on Palau Island, was drafted there and died in the war of illness at age 24. Seishu heard how his mother died from his sisters who had evacuated with her during the Battle of Okinawa.

"When they saw the American military landing at Nakagusuku Bay, my mother evacuated with two of my older sisters and two older brothers," he explained. "They passed through Haebaru and headed for the southern part of Okinawa Main Island. Heavy fighting continued from late May into June. They had taken refuge in a natural cave at the foot of Mount Yoza when, one afternoon, several Japanese soldiers came, forcing them out of the cave. After that, they desperately sought cover from heavy gunboat shelling. They found a large tree and were sitting under it huddled together when an American artillery shell suddenly exploded near them. Shrapnel had slashed through my mother's chest and head, killing her instantly." It was June 9, 1945. Uto was forty-six years old. "She died because the Japanese military forced my family out of the cave into enemy fire. It was a war crime. The Japanese military killed her." Neither a soldier nor a military employee, his mother had evacuated with her children, and was killed cruelly and senselessly. Had Japanese soldiers not forced the Sakihara family out of the cave, she would likely have lived through the war. Among the approximately 94,000 civilian deaths in the Battle of Okinawa (figures compiled by the Welfare Section of the Okinawa Prefectural Government), untold numbers of people died this way.



American forces in battle in a southern village

Mr. Sakihara's mother, a victim of the Imperial Japanese Army, is registered at Yasukuni as "the enshrined spirit of a fallen war hero."

His mother's identification card, which Mr. Sakihara obtained from Yasukuni's "repository of enshrined deities," reads,

Class: Unpaid employee of the military
Assignment: 32nd Army Command
Date Deceased: June 9, 1945 (killed in action)

"For the perpetrators of her death to make my mother into a god is a desecration of her," said Mr. Sakihara. After learning that his mother and his older brother Seiha had been enshrined, he contacted Yasukuni several times, seeking removal of their names. "It's unconscionable to arbitrarily label people killed in war as 'heroic spirits who died for the nation' without even the consent of their bereaved families." Last September, in demanding their removal, he criticized enshrinement as "a tool to build a war-making

state that would have outraged my mother and older brother.” In its refusal, Yasukuni claimed that “those honored by enshrinement here have given their lives for our nation. Recording their names does not require the prior consent of their bereaved families. At Yasukuni Shrine, the freedom of religious activities is guaranteed.”

“My mother was murdered. She did not give her life for the nation. Yasukuni officials ignore the rights of individuals, claiming that the consent of bereaved families is not required and that they are only exercising their religious freedom. This is because they are confident they enjoy the same kind of special status and privileges granted by the state before and during the war to designated government shrines. Their arrogance fills me with anger.”

A legal machination is used to conceal the truth about the Battle of Okinawa

Enshrinement has always been the *raison d'être* of Yasukuni Shrine. After the war, the Welfare Ministry continued to gather personal information, such as names and legal domiciles, from all prefectural and municipal governments about soldiers and military employees who died during the war. In the case of Okinawa, under prolonged U.S. military occupation, records were obtained from the American supervised “Government of the Ryukyu Islands” until reversion to Japanese administration in 1972. Copies of the information collected were turned over to the Yasukuni Shrine Incorporated Religious Organization without the knowledge or permission of the bereaved families. Why, they asked, were the names of non-combatant civilians, such as Mr. Sakihara’s mother, included as “persons killed in action?” The answer reveals how the Law for Protection of War Victims and Bereaved Families (enacted in 1952) has been exploited as a machination to conceal the truth about the Battle of Okinawa. Starting in 1953, the law was implemented in U.S.-occupied Okinawa to provide pensions for the bereaved families of soldiers and military

employees. However, the law’s provisions didn’t apply to the tens of thousands of Okinawan civilians who had died trying to escape the fighting. Caught in the crossfire of ground combat, most who survived lost everything they owned, including what was stolen from them.

Since approximately half of the Japanese who died in the battle were Okinawans (according to the current litigation), their bereaved families were entirely justified in seeking compensation. The problem leading to the lawsuit arose because their claims to compensation were exploited to cover up atrocities committed by the Japanese military. Instead of seeking revision of the law so that it covered non-combatant civilians, the Japanese Welfare Ministry decided to deal with applications for compensation from local associations of bereaved families by changing the status of their dead relatives to “combat participants” (*sento sankasha*) so the current law would apply. The Ministry divided the “circumstances of combat” into twenty categories which, it claimed, reflected actual conditions during the battle. Bereaved families would be entitled to receive compensation if the deaths of their relatives fit into one of these categories, which included “offerings of cave shelters,” “donations of food,” and “group suicides” (actually, enforced killings).

Applications required the attestation of third parties. Even when their relatives had died because Japanese soldiers forced them out of cave shelters or stole their food, bereaved families had to fill out these forms to become eligible for compensation under the law indicating that their relatives had made voluntary “offerings” and “donations,” and that they had died in combat. Local city, town, and village employees were assigned to provide “helpful” guidance to bereaved families through the application process so they could receive compensation. “Official documents” were thus produced that classified

approximately 50,000 people as “combat participants,” directly contradicting actual conditions during the Battle of Okinawa. Mr. Sakihara’s mother was one of many whose cases were handled this way.

As a result, the reality of the Battle of Okinawa, in which tens of thousands of non-combatant civilians died because they were helplessly caught in the fighting, was disguised as “war in which military and civilians were united as one.” This falsification influenced the Japanese Education Ministry’s revision of textbooks. (See Ishihara Masaie, “‘Engo-ho’ ni yotte netsuzo sareta ‘Okinawa-sen ninshiki,’” *Okinawa Kokusai Daigaku Shakai Bunka Kenkyu*, March, 2007; and Tanaka Nobumasa, *Dokumento Yasukuni Soshō*, Iwanami Shoten.) And it explains how Mr. Sakihara’s mother and many other non-combatant civilians came to be enshrined at Yasukuni as “war heroes who gave their lives for the nation.”

The issue of the tangled relationship between the Law for Protection of War Victims and Bereaved Families and the enshrinement of civilian victims in the Battle of Okinawa was first raised during the lawsuit filed in Okinawa challenging the constitutionality of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichiro’s visits to Yasukuni Shrine. Although the Naha District Court rejected the suit, its verdict criticized “the

enshrinement at Yasukuni of Okinawan civilians, who were neither soldiers nor military employees, together with the former Japanese military, who were perpetrators of enforced group suicides.”

Mr. Sakihara says, “If the court does not approve cancellation of my mother’s and the others’ enshrinement, it will mean that the emperor’s army has been pardoned and exempted from responsibility for the war crimes it committed.” Plaintiffs’ spokesperson Kawabata Kozen adds that, “For me, there can be no postwar settlement until the names of my mother and brother are removed from Yasukuni Shrine.” For these plaintiffs, the war of 63 years ago still continues to this day.

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