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"Japanese" War Criminals Seek Redress

By Yutaka Shuichi

[The largest number of "Japanese" executed in the B and C Class war tribunals that followed the Tokyo trials after World War II were actually Koreans and Taiwanese, many of them low ranking guards or police in POW camps.

The name "Lee Hyok Rae" referred to below is also commonly written as Yi Hak-Nae.

During the war, Lee/Yi was known by the Japanese name Hiromura Kakurai.

The Australian army surgeon Sir Edward ("Weary") Dunlop writes in his diary of his hatred for Mr Lee/Yi, whom he also knew as "the Lizard."

As Hiromura, Mr Yi was indicted as a war criminal tried at Singapore by a war crimes court, and sentenced to death.

For the death penalty to be confirmed, Dunlop was asked in 1946 to come to Singapore to testify for the war trial prosecution.

He declined. The war was over. Hatred served no purpose.

The death penalty was therefore reprieved.

(For a detailed account, see Gavan McCormack and Hank Nelson, The Burma-Thai Railway: Memory and History, or in Japanese the writings of Utsumi Aiko, especially her massive and authoritative study of Japanese prisoner policy published in May 2005.)

In August 1991 Yi Hak-Nae visited Australia for a conference of Burma Railway survivors and scholars, where he met, for the first time in almost 50 years, and apologized to Dunlop. Later he visited him at his home, and presented him with a memento gold watch inscribed "No More Hintok."

Mr Yi later referred to this personal act of apology and reconciliation as having lifted a heavy burden from his heart.

After the second meeting of Dunlop and Yi, I happened to meet Dunlop at a meeting at the Australian War Memorial. By then, Dunlop was perhaps the most famous and widely-loved Australian of his time, later to be featured on 50 cent coins and represented by a statue which today stands in front of that same museum.

Asking after Mr Yi's health, Dunlop spoke of a certain "guilt" that he felt towards him but had never before expressed. When I protested that he had no reason to feel any such guilt, he told me of an occasion at Hintok camp on the "Burma Railway" in (probably) 1943, when, overwhelmed by hatred for "the Lizard," he prepared a rock and went to wait behind a tree at the camp gate for him to return from an errand, determined to bash "the Lizard's" brains out. By chance, however, while waiting, he was called on the camp loudspeakers on a routine matter. The spell was broken. He threw away the stone.

Dunlop died in 1993, shortly after having told me this story.

Had he lived, he would undoubtedly have wished well Mr Yi and his Doshinkai associates in their quest for justice from the government of Japan.

(Gavan McCormack, May 2005)]

When Lee Hyok Rae was growing up, he never learned about human rights or the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners. Instead, he was raised in the Korean peninsula during Japan's colonization when the most important lesson was how to become a loyal "imperial citizen."

He learned well. During World War II, he toiled for the Japanese military, strictly obeyed his superiors and pledged loyalty to the emperor. He was even sentenced to die as a "Japanese" war criminal.

But he soon learned his loyalty was for naught.

Many ethnic Koreans were executed to take responsibility for war crimes committed as "Japanese citizens."

Those who did survive, like Lee, lost their Japanese citizenship—and claims for compensation or livelihood assistance—after Japan signed the San Francisco Treaty in 1951.

"My time is running out," said Lee, now 80. "I really need to see a compensation bill come into being this year."

Lee is chairman of Doshinkai, a group that has been trying to win compensation for former Korean war criminals for 50 years.

Many of Japan's former colonial subjects were branded Class-B and Class-C war criminals after being convicted in Allied tribunals of

"conventional war crimes," such as maltreating prisoners of war.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. Hopes are high among survivors and supporters that compensation will finally be given to the former war criminals.

Some say this year might be their last chance.

Lee, who now lives in Tokyo's Itabashi Ward, served as a guard at a POW camp in Thailand during the war.

In March 1947, the Australian military tribunal sentenced Lee to death for abusing POWs.

The sentence was later commuted.

About 5,700 military and civilian employees were arrested by the Allies around Southeast Asia and brought to war crimes tribunals for Class-B and Class-C criminals; 984 were sentenced to death.

A total of 321 "Japanese" originating from the Korean peninsula and Taiwan were convicted — 23 Koreans and 26 Taiwanese were executed.

"I saw my buddies get executed. I was living my days in constant fear of death. I suffered and fought my inner demons, wondering why I had to die as a Japanese war criminal. I couldn't find a single clue," Lee said.

With the San Francisco peace treaty taking effect in 1952, Japan became an independent country. Lee and others from the Korean Peninsula lost their Japanese citizenship.

They were now Koreans ineligible for coverage under a relief bill that offered livelihood assistance and compensation to former Japanese military members and civilian employees.

But even after the San Francisco Treaty took effect, Lee remained imprisoned as a "Japanese" war criminal.

He was released in 1956.

"They called us Japanese when they wanted to, and told us we were foreigners after things went wrong," Lee said. "(In the Japanese government's eyes) we could be any nationality."

Since then, Doshinkai has sought compensation every time a new Cabinet is formed, but to no avail.

In 1991, the group moved the battle to the legal arena by filing a lawsuit against the government.

Their case was ultimately shot down, but the Tokyo High Court made a request in 1998: "It is desirable that an appropriate legislative measure be implemented in order to ensure some form of resolve as soon as possible."

But the Diet has done nothing so far. Four of the seven aging plaintiffs have died.

Of the 50 Doshinkai members, only 13 are actual former war criminals.

The remaining 37 are bereaved family members who took up the fight to fulfill the wishes of the deceased.

It finally seems that a new understanding is arising among some Diet members concerning the need to implement a humanitarian support measure.

A nonpartisan group of lawmakers met last month in Nagatacho, Tokyo, to hear about the history of the Doshinkai movement.

Big names, including Tatsuo Sato, a Lower House member of the Liberal Democratic Party, Yukio Hatoyama, former chief of Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan), and Takako Doi, former leader of the Social Democratic Party, were instrumental in arranging the meeting.

Lee plans to send off the minutes of the meeting to all Diet members by the end of the month to expand the support base and achieve the long-awaited compensation bill.

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