

# JAPANIZATION OF THE HOLOCAUST

**Kinue Tokudome**

Has the Holocaust been Japanized? The answer is yes, but in two very different ways. Both are related to how Japan deals with its own war time history.

The title of this session is “Shoah in Third World of Literature.” So this morning I would like to focus my talk on what average educated Japanese people are reading these days in newspapers and magazines on the issue of Japan’s war crimes, and how these writings relate to the history of the Holocaust; and moreover, the way postwar Germany has dealt with it. But first let me talk a little about my background.

I came to this country in 1978, as a wife of a typical Japanese businessperson. But I was fortunate to have the opportunity to go to school, college, and then graduate school in this country all while raising two American born children. Being a student in this country and being a mother to American-born children, I have learned so many things. If I’m to choose one thing that I learned, or would not have learned if I stayed in Japan, it is that one person can make a difference; that’s the notion you cherish.

The opportunity to make difference in my own humble way came five years ago when I listened to the testimony of a beautiful Auschwitz survivor. After the testimony I went to her and said, “After listening to your story and testimony, I’m so ashamed that many anti-Semitic books, even ones denying the Holocaust, are being sold in Japan.” And I will never forget what she said to me: “Don’t just be ashamed of what other Japanese people do. Just think about what you can do to change the situation.”

Those words led to my embarking on writing and interviewing on the Holocaust. From my personal experience with meeting these people - survivors, scholars, and activists - and I can tell the Japanese people the truth of the Holocaust, and lessons from it. That is how I became interested in this issue five years ago. After I published my book, which took two years, I couldn’t avoid the question relating to my own country’s history. So now I’m working on my own country’s dark history.

Enough about myself. Let me turn to today’s topic. First there are people in Japan who are very critical of Japan not coming to terms with war crimes it committed, such as killing of the civilians in Nanjing and the human experiments by the infamous Unit 731 in Manchuria. They are historians, journalists, human rights activists, and even lawyers, representing victims in their lawsuits against the Japanese government. These writers highlight how little Japan has done, not by explicitly saying that those war crimes are comparable to the Holocaust, but by referring to the way Germany faced its past squarely and took responsibility. They often write about postwar Germany’s approach to the Holocaust to convince the Japanese public and policymakers that Japan should do the same. Their writings usually appear in liberal newspapers and magazines.

Second, the Holocaust is also used by other groups of people who try to downplay the history of Japan's war crimes while trying to justify Japan's entry into the war: for them, a war to liberate Asia from Western imperialism. There are also so-called "historians," journalists and cartoonists who adamantly oppose the comparison between the Holocaust and what the Japanese military did in Asia. They argue that if some large scale killings occurred during the war, they were most likely the of heated battles and were totally different from the state-sponsored and systematic killings of the Holocaust. Therefore, they refuse to acknowledge that Japan is far behind Germany in terms of taking responsibility of its war crimes.

Writers who belong to this group often write about the uniqueness of the Holocaust to convince the general public and policy-makers that the Holocaust should not be compared to Japan's military actions. Accordingly, how postwar Germany dealt with former victims should not be compared to Japan's dealing with its former war crime victims. They write regularly for very conservative newspapers and a couple of right-wing magazines. I should say, sadly, they are very popular. It is said that some major Japanese corporations support their activities financially.

Interestingly, both groups are fully aware of how the comparison of Japan's war crimes with the Holocaust can exert a powerful influence on the debate on Japan's wartime history. That awareness came from mostly translated books on the Holocaust. When you go to a Japanese bookstore, you can find a score of books on the Holocaust. Raul Hilberg's monumental book *The Destruction of the European Jews* has been translated into Japanese, as well as the works of Lucy Dawidovich, Michael Berenbaum, not to mention almost every work written by Elie Wiesel. In addition, a traveling exhibit by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, *Courage to Remember*, went to almost all major cities in Japan in the past five years, and was seen by more than a million Japanese people. "Schindler's List" was a big hit in Japan.

But there is one more reason why relating the Holocaust, even mentioning the Holocaust alone, can have a powerful influence on Japanese writers. That is a notion that "you just can't touch the Holocaust" or that you cannot even touch any issue related to Jews. Let me explain the background.

In 1995, a Japanese magazine called *Marvo Polo*, published by one of the major Japanese publishers, ran an article entitled, "There Were No Nazi Gas Chambers." That was almost a carbon copy of what the Holocaust deniers in the West had been writing. But in this case, the publisher was a major Japanese publisher. The Simon Wiesenthal Center immediately protested and sent the English translation of the article to companies that placed advertisements in this magazine. Faced with an imminent withdrawal of this advertisement, this Japanese publisher not only apologized but also shut down the magazine itself. That sent a very powerful message to the Japanese media - that you just can't touch the Holocaust, you just cannot upset the Jewish people. Jewish people were [seen to be] so powerful that they could even make one of Japan's largest publishers shut down their magazine. Of course, that was based on stereotypical views of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, for better or for worse, that is the notion held by many Japanese writers today.

That means that neither group I described earlier can afford to let the other side use the Holocaust to its advantage. So what do they do? The first group, which I call the liberal group, is trying to present the Holocaust as a history whose lesson transcends national boundaries. For example, a philosophy professor of Tokyo University - who, by the way, helped with the Japanese screening of Claude Lanzmann's "Shoah" in Japanese - quoted Lanzmann as saying that the Shoah had relevance in Japan too. Any people, for that matter, have the responsibility to remember.

The second group - I will call them the right-wing group - aggressively attacks any attempt to equate Japanese wartime conduct and the Holocaust. For example, right-wing magazines write: "When the Holocaust is coupled with rape, neither American nor Japanese of any sensitivity can help lapsing into silence." Skillfully using this psychology, some have built up a strong presentation. So the other episode they repeatedly write about is that of Chinue Sugihara's rescue of Jewish refugees. Sugihara, of course, was the Japanese diplomat who issued thousands of transit visas to Jewish refugees when he was posted to Lithuania in 1940. This group insists that Sugihara was simply following policy of Japan at the time, namely racial equality and harmony.

The current battle is over the junior high textbook, recently passed the Minister of Education. The approval came after the Ministry's screening panel ordered 137 sections to be revised. The text was written by a group called the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, who by the way are the same people from the right-wing group. The overall tone of this new textbook is justification for Japan's wartime aggression. According to the authors, it was a war that Japan fought to liberate itself from Western imperialism. As for the Japanese occupation of Korea, the draft of the textbook said [Japan was] in line with international law. The original draft described what they call the Nanking "incident," this way: "there might be some killing since it was a war, but nothing on the scale of the Holocaust." But this sentence was also deleted.

As was expected, the approval of the textbook enraged China and Korea. Both the Chinese and South Korean governments are demanding revisions, while the Japanese government claims that this book does not reflect its official views. Those who have been warning about this text, the liberal groups, are now working very hard not to let local education boards adopt it.

The battle between these two groups is also being fought in the courtroom. As you know, many of the former victims are beginning to sue the Japanese government, and sometimes the Japanese companies, for their treatment of women, and American POWs. (These were POWs caught by the Japanese military and then sent to Japan to do forced labor for Japanese companies during the war.) But the Japanese government and the companies insist that this issue had been resolved by the Peace Treaty of 1951. Strangely enough, the US government sided with the Japanese and sort of came to the rescue of Japanese corporations. According to the Peace Treaty, the United States waived the right of their nationals to claim compensation against Japan. It was a political decision, of course. The United States' immediate concern was to bring Japan into the camp against the Communist bloc. These legal battles, especially slave labor cases, are also compared with Holocaust restitution. In fact, some of the lawyers and activists went to Germany last year and studied the foundation set up by the German government and corporations to compensate former

slave labor victims, including POWs. The right-wing group quickly responded, arguing that Germany did sign the Peace Treaty with the former victim nation and that makes it totally different from Japan. Many of the former POWs were very furious. They inevitably compared their government's facilitating role between Holocaust victims and countries such as Austria, Switzerland and Germany, and the way the United States government does not apply the same standards to their sufferings.

The US Congress was somewhat more supportive of their cases. The Senate Judiciary Committee convened last year on POW lawsuits; they also enacted the Japanese Imperial Government Disclosure Act— it is an almost identical law to the Nazi war crime Disclosure Act— requiring the United States government to declassify records on war crimes committed by Japan and Germany. So in that sense, your government is already comparing two crimes committed in Europe and Asia under the same law.

You may have already guessed that I've been writing about these developments for Japanese magazines — liberal ones. While I was doing the research, I had the privilege of personally knowing some former POWs. One of the most unforgettable experiences was accompanying the very first plaintiff to sue the Japanese government. He decided to go back to the coal mine for three years he was forced to work in during the war. He wrote a book called *My Hitch in Hell*, an incredible book that I read. Most importantly for me, he allowed me to come with him when he decided to go back to the coal mine after 54 years. It was indeed an emotional trip, and I felt so privileged that he allowed me to come with him and share his feeling as he traced back the ruins of the coal mine that he once endured during three years of slave labor work. I wanted to write a personal story to let the Japanese people know what the real issues are all about. To make a difference, it seems to me that many liberal writers are writing about this issue.

In the end, it's a political decision that Japanese politicians have to make. To the extent that Japanese is a democratic society in which we elect our politicians, writers have a role to inform the Japanese people. That is why I have to keep writing and participating in this type of symposium. This issue is also a concern for your own veterans. They are wonderful people and I want to see justice for them. Thank you for listening. I am looking forward to your questions.

## DISCUSSION

### Panelists

**Xu Xin:** What do Japanese think of the Holocaust in terms of being an ally of Germany during the Second World War? When people talk about the Holocaust, do they connect it with Japan's attitudes toward Jews at any time?

**Shawkat Toorawa:** It is particularly ironic that deniers of the Japanese war crimes do so by arguing the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The other irony was the shutting down of the *Marco Polo* magazine, perpetuating a certain stereotype. I was curious if any other panelists heard of this?

**Edward Edmondson:** The alliance between Japan and Nazi Germany reminds me of the way in which race offers politicized and manipulated symbols, social constructs of which we all know. The Japanese were ultra-sensitive to white world racism from 1900. In fact, many people argue that was one of the underlying factors leading to their anti-American position. In 1919, you have the League of Nations introducing a racial equality clause, which was vetoed. Here they are arguing strong racial appeals against white racism and at the same time parading them for their purposes. Hitler, as we do know, reluctantly accepted Japan as honorary whites. He was utmost uncomfortable with it, but did it for wartime purposes.

The United States government is not really in the presence of this conference, but I want everyone to understand something critical happening here over that last two days. The United States presents itself to the world as a protector of human rights, a protector of democracy. Somebody once said that the United States only requires democracy of its enemies and not of its friends. Think about it. It is important for us living here in America to understand that the United States, which potentially has so much enormous influence, is very much part of the problem. One of the unresolved issues in this country, in spite of what people want to say, is race. We saw yesterday that the United States was involved in supporting the genocide inside the regime in Guatemala. And we see this morning that the United States sided with Japan on this issue. So I want all of us to think about it, that the United States is very much at the heart of the problem.

**Xu Xin:** During the war, or before the war, the Japanese had very strange attitudes, probably connected with that decision to shut down that *Marco Polo* magazine. The Japanese government, or those people who made the decisions at the time, really had to stereotype Jews. That is why dealing with Jewish refugees in China, or especially those Jews who came from Siberia to Manchuria, the Japanese really had a different attitude towards Jews. In Shanghai too. Finally, in 1943, they established a Jewish quarter. It was a restricted area for refugees in Shanghai. By and large, Japanese treatment of Jews was not bad, actually.

Ms. Tokudome mentions how Japan does not want to touch upon the Holocaust as an issue. It reminds me of stereotypes in Japan because of contact with Jews in twentieth century. Because before the twentieth century, Japan never had any contacts with Jews. There were no Jews in Japan. I do want to know how Japanese now feel about this issue.

**Chivy Sok:** In discussing a lot of difficult issues facing a nation, I think the role of civil society organizations becomes very critical. In the last ten to fifteen years, we've seen all over the world - especially in the developing world - an explosion of NGOs, and I had the privilege to work with a lot of them in Asia. One thing that struck me hard was that each time we were looking to work with NGOs, many of them were missing in Japan. It was hard to find activists who were part of the NGO scene in Japan. I was wondering if you could comment why Japan is not vibrant in terms of civil society and whether this lack of civil society has any connection with Japan's effort to face its own history?

### Audience

**Unidentified:** Sex and gender issues are very important now in Holocaust studies. And I understand now that Anne Frank is very popular with Japanese girls. Can you explain why?

**Unidentified:** We are familiar with Hitler's racial theories and how that played out in World War Two. Could you talk a little about Japan's own race theories and about current Japanese racial identity?

**Marian Diamond:** You mention that you wrote the book *Interviews with Holocaust Survivors* as a response because you were feeling that people were not in touch with what was going on in Japan, and that there was denial and so on. I wanted to know if your book was published in Japan how it was received.

**Unidentified:** One of the Pulitzer winning prize books in history is a book dealing with the emperor during the Second World War. I wanted to know if there is any relationship between the fact that it is very difficult for the Japanese to come to terms and to permit comparison with themselves and what happened in Germany with regard to the treatment of Asians during the Second World War. Does it have something to do with insulting the emperor? The idea is that we cannot be compared because we did this in accordance with the need to keep the imperial tradition. Is it a fact that it is not a topic at all - that scholars will not discuss it because it might damage the imperial tradition?

### **Kinue Tokudome Responds**

First, "Japanese attitudes towards Jewish people." It's mystifying, a very strange attitude. [Japanese] respect what [Jews] have accomplished throughout their history and somehow conclude that Jewish people are a very special people, not like any other people. That's a reality. The *Marco Polo* incident was very unfortunate because they, the Japanese media, didn't get the right message. Because the Simon Wiesenthal Center protested the running of this article, the [true] message didn't get through and the net result was that since that incident there are very few articles about the Holocaust. In a way this enhanced the stereotypical view and image that Jewish people are very powerful because they could make the largest Japanese publisher shut down the magazine. It was in a way very unfortunate but the Center had to do what it believed.

"Japan's alliance with Germany." Of course, it was a political alliance and I don't think that Japanese people share that view of racial hatred toward Jewish people. In fact, during the War the Japanese government briefly considered using the Jewish people to become the so-called go-between-group with the United States of Japanese leaders, based again on the stereotypical [thinking] that "Jewish people are so powerful they can help us negotiate between Japan and the United States." So the decision to grant Jewish people transit visits was a decision made by the Japanese government at the time. In that sense, the right-wing argument is that the state was [just] following its policy. But to use this policy to justify is too much of a stretch, considering what we did in Asia.

The US being "part of the problem." I must agree in this sense: I mentioned the US government passed the Japanese Imperial Disclosure Act. At the last minute a very important provision was deleted which was in the Nazi Disclosure Act. The CIA had to present their documents if they demanded the record of the war crimes committed by the Nazis. But in the Japanese War Crime Disclosure Act, this section was deleted. Activists

were very angry because now again the US government was applying double standards to Nazi and Japanese war crimes.

“NGOs in Japan.” I must disagree. There are many NGOs in Japan. They are willing to [participate in] the UN Commission in Geneva for Human Rights, and in the comfort women[issue], and these days are inviting American POWs. In fact, I was recently invited to Tokyo with Robert Cooper. NGOs organized the whole meeting. NGOs are very active in Japan.

Anne Frank’s book is generally popular. Why is it popular? Most likely because in the book you can relate to the suffering of that little girl. As for the influence of this book, I’m not sure how much influence it has on the average Japanese person.

With regard to question about how Japanese have to be neutral — I absolutely agree. We should know what happened. Again, NGOs are pushing this bill to declassify all of these wartime documents. Of course, the right-wing groups are arguing that we [should] not open all the documents. When you think about neutral history, we are so far from it.

This is not a response to a question, but my comment [to Locksley Edmondson]. You mentioned black persons not receiving support of the US Government for reparations; you also mentioned that the US Government is very supportive of the reparation movement with regards to Nazi Holocaust, including the settlement over the slave labor issues. I would like to say the US Government is not supportive of their former veterans who are victims of equally reprehensible slave labor used by former Japanese corporations during the war. I must wonder if those policies were not really based on humanitarian reasons but only political considerations.