We Shall Overcome

Education Can Sometimes Be a Frightening Prospect

Malala Yousafzai, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year, stressed the importance of education as a solution. She stating, “One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world. Education is the only solution. Education first.” I couldn’t agree more, but on the other hand, education that is distorted can also change the world for the worse. We all know what the “emperor-as-god” education of 70 years ago resulted in.

The sudden elections called for by the Liberal Democratic Party at the end of last year resulted in an overwhelming majority for the ruling party. With this as a backdrop, the Abe government is working towards a rapid revision of the Japanese constitution. However, this “revision” is in effect a return to that previous Japanese mindset.

As a preliminary step towards that goal, the Rising Sun flag and the “Kimigayo” anthem that originated in the emperor system have now officially been made into the national flag and national anthem. The National Teachers Union, which has been attacked by the right as focusing too much on individualism in education, has lost much of influence it once held. Likewise, “morals” are being reintroduced as part of the curriculum, and this certainly appears to have the goal of reviving the mindset of old Japan through an emphasis of the group (nation) over the individual and a whitewashing of Japanese history. It is this kind of rightest education that we must raise our voices against.

Yokoyama Jun’ichi, Higashi Kobe Church
Seeking Complete Exoneration for Hakamada Iwao, an Innocent Man on Death Row

Momma Sachie
Vice Chairperson of the Association to Save Hakamada Iwao

My Only Wish
“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33)

On that day at just past 10 am, as we saw the announcement of the beginning of the retrial, the group of committee members gathered there all shed tears of joy. I soon left the group with Hakamada’s sister Hideko to go the train station to take the Shinkansen Bullet Train to Tokyo and visit with Hakamada in prison.

Ever since 1986, we had been lobbying for only one thing, and that was to get that retrial. And then on March 27, 2014, the Shizuoka District Court gave its decision to not only rescind the death penalty but also to release him from prison. That verse that I memorized as a 6th grader in Sunday School came flooding back to me that day in such a satisfying way.

What was the Hakamada Incident all about?
On June 30, 1966, a family of 4 in the city of Shimizu, Shizuoka Prefecture was robbed and killed and then their house set on fire. Hakamada Iwao, who was 30 at the time, was an employee at the small miso factory that the family owned and operated, and he was fingered as the culprit. Hakamada had formerly been a professional boxer, and so it’s apparent that this prejudiced the police investigators. His fundamental rights were violated, as he was put through intense interrogation and forced to sign a “confession” to a crime he didn’t commit. During the trial, he consistently protested his innocence, but in 1980, he was declared guilty and put on death row. In 1981, an appeal was launched in the Shizuoka District Court, but this appeal was rejected by the Supreme Court, and so a second appeal was launched. Finally, on March 27, 2014, after 33 years in the appeals process, the Shizuoka District Court, under the leadership of Judge Murayama Hiroaki, opened the way for a retrial. He rescinded the death penalty and incarceration and Hakamada Isao was immediately released. However, since the Shizuoka District Prosecutor and Tokyo High Court filed a protest, the retrial has not yet begun, and Hakamada is still technically a “convicted criminal.”

Hakamada’s Present Condition
It’s been almost a year since Hakamada was released from the Tokyo Prison. Having been in prison for 48 years (34 of those on death row), his mental condition had deteriorated to the point he was living in a world of delusion.

The Association to Save Hakamada Iwao was begun 22 years ago by Abe Haruo, an attorney who is now deceased, with the help of the Daini Tokyo Bar Association, and as part of their efforts to protect him, they had a psychiatrist by the name of Kaga Otohiko write up an evaluation of him. Here is a quote from what he wrote as reported in the Sept. 25, 2014 Mainichi Newspaper: “His recovery time will be proportional to his time in incarceration. Having lived in a state of fear for some half a century, it’s important that we take time in helping him understand that he is free and safe.”

In August 2014, he was hospitalized with pneumonia, and after that, he had an operation on his gall bladder and heart, finally being released from the hospital on September 29. Since then, he has been resting at home, at first being unable to go out, but the care of his sister Hideko and his supporters in Hamamatsu, he has gradually been able to leave his shell and venture out in public. By mid-October, he was able to speak at a meeting, and has been invited to other locations around the country, where his ability to speak coherently has gradually improved. On November 15, at a rally for abolishing the death penalty, he said, “With regards to the power of the state to execute its
citizens, it is truly sinful. No human being should kill another human being.” Likewise, at an event on December 20, when he was presented with the Tada Yoko Antiauthoritarian Human Rights Award, he talked about how at his first trial, one member of the three judge panel that decided his fate, Kumamoto Norimichi, actually believed in his innocence and that Hakamada’s confession had not been voluntary. (The “Tada Yoko Antiauthoritarian Human Rights Award” was instituted in 1989 in memory of attorney Tada Yoko, who died at the age of 29. It is awarded yearly to an individual or organization that has championed freedom and human rights. The presentation ceremony is held every December during the month in which she died, and includes a lecture and dinner party in addition to the presentation ceremony.)

Hakamada Isao was baptized on Dec. 24, 1984 by Catholic Cardinal Shiroyanagi Seiichi and given the baptismal name of Pauro (Paul). (Cardinal “Peter” Shiroyanagi, 1928 – 2009, served more many years as the Archbishop of the Tokyo Diocese.) While in prison, Hakamada wrote some 5000 pages of letters and diaries that were edited into a book entitled, “Lord, How Long? — Letters Of An Innocent Man On Death Row.” (Shinkyo Publishers)

Hakamada Isao is turns 79 this year, and so time is short. We need to work together to ensure that his retrial begins soon so that his name can be cleared and so that he can live out the few years he might still have of his life in health and peace. We ask for your prayers and your petitions in his behalf.

Discriminated-against Buraku in Southern Osaka Serves as Location for Documentary
Rev. Higuchi Yoichi, Kumeda Church, Osaka

South of Osaka, there is a discriminated-against buraku region called Higashi that dates from feudal times, when it went by the name Shimamura. Archeological digs have confirmed that by the 15th Century, there was a community living there. Among the artifacts dug up, in addition to pieces of pottery, there were numerous bones of cows, horses, deer and wild pigs, which confirms that the people living there made their living from slaughtering animals and selling the meat. As of yet, however, no documentary evidence from that period gives any specifics as to how they were discriminated against. Historical resources that clarify the discriminatory status of the people living there all date from the 17th Century onward.

From the 18th Century, the people of Shimamura came under the control of the Kishiwada Fiefdom, and the people there were referred to by the derogatory name of “eta” (literally “filth” (defiled) abundant), and they were forced to bear duties that other commoners were not. The cleaning of the Kishiwada Castle and the manufacture of leather reins for horses were among their assigned duties. One particular duty that is particularly worthy of mention is that of helping with executions, which were carried out by beheading the condemned. The place of execution was on the banks of the Tsuda River, which flows between the Kishiwada Castle and the location of the village of Shimamura. The actual beheading itself was left to a Kishiwada samurai swordsman, but the rest of the dirty work was left up to the people of Shimamura. They brought the hoes and dirt-carrying tools to prepare the location, disposed of the body afterwards, and if it were to be put on display as a warning, took care of
all of that as well. It's true that the feudal lords paid them for their labor, but such a duty as this was only placed on people of "eta" status.

By the 20th Century, little had really changed with regards to the discrimination against the people of this area. They were discriminated against in terms of employment, and so they had average incomes that were far below that of people in the surrounding areas. As a result, the people of the town that was how called “Higashi” lived in very substandard housing that was crammed together.

Just prior to the end of WWII, on July 10, 1945, that general region was bombed by American planes flying from Saipan to deliver incendiary bombs. Due to the extremely crowded nature of the neighborhood, the fires spread much more quickly that in neighboring areas, and so many residents lost their lives. Sixteen residents of the village were killed that day, and so this is one way that such discrimination results in death.

The Buraku Liberation League opened its Kaizuka Branch Office in Higashi in 1969 (Kaizuka being the name of the city it had been incorporated into) in an organized effort to bring to an end to such discrimination. The Kaizuka Branch began to lobby government officials to begin the process of widening the roads and improving housing and other such infrastructure. Likewise, they worked to eliminate employment discrimination and other such discriminatory practices. As a result of these efforts, there were quite a few significant improvements, including public housing units, medical clinics, daycare centers and even cemeteries.

In 2013, the community of Higashi was featured in a documentary film that was widely discussed. Entitled “The Story of a Certain Meat Market,” the movie featured the Kitade family and their family-run meat business, and was directed by Hanabusu Aya. This family raised their own cattle, butchered them and then sold the meat in their own shop, thus handling all aspects of the business without resorting to specialization. It kind of reminded me of life for the patriarchs of Genesis in the Old Testament. In the movie,
Reflections on the Study Trip to Germany

Seeking Solidarity With the Sinti-Roma People
Higashitani Makoto

For 10 days, from Sept. 17 to 26, 2014, three of us from the Buraku Liberation Center went to Germany to learn about the situation there. Accompanying me (Higashitani Makoto, Management Committee Chairperson) were Okamoto Takuya (Activities Committee Chairperson) and Tanimoto Miki (Staff person of the BLC).

One purpose of our going to Germany was to express our gratitude to The Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) for their financial support of our mission here in Japan for many years. Likewise, we wanted to show our support for the Sinti-Roma people who experience discrimination that is quite similar to the discrimination people of buraku background face in Japan, and so we went there to meet with people in that community and to learn about their history, their present situation and the activities they are involved in to rid their society of such discrimination. We have up until this time been relating to the Sinti-Roma people through the auspices of EMS, and we also have similarly had relations of solidarity with the Dalit people in India, who face similar discrimination.

While there, we visited Sinti-Roma communities, along with the “Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma,” and we also viewed the remains of a Nazi extermination center. As we met with members of the Sinti-Roma community and learned of their history and lives, the severity of the discrimination and persecution they faced was beyond what we had imagined.

At one of the Sinti-Roma communities we visited, we hear of an incident that happened just last year. One of their members was accidentally run over by a truck and was killed. The truck driver wanted to visit the family and extend his apologies and condolences, but the policeman put a stop to that, saying, “He was just a Sinti-Roma, and so you don’t need to apologize.” This case is now before a court, but little headway is being made.

As to who these people are and where they came from, both the “Sinti” and the “Roma” are minority ethnic groups that refer to themselves with these names in their native language of Romani. They still use this language as a second language within their homes while speaking the primary languages of the countries they are in. The Sinti came to central Europe in the latter middle ages, while the Roma came via southeastern Europe into Germany. Both groups originated in the India subcontinent, but they have lived in Europe for centuries, have been in Germany for the last 600 years. As a group, the Sinti-Roma have a variety of lifestyles in the various countries they live in, and so are quite different from the stereotypical image of the “gypsy,” which in itself is a derogatory term.

The three of us will never forget our time with the Sinti-Roma people, and we intend to further our solidarity with them as we endeavor together to rid our societies of such discrimination. I look forward to opportunities to share what I learned, and if scheduling allows am willing to go anywhere to do that.

Visiting the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma
Tanimoto Miki

On our visit to the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg, we met with the Director, Mr. Delfeld, who told us of the situation of the
Sinti-Roma even now in Europe and how they are forced to hide their identity in order to make a living. His son was also there, and he said, “It is very difficult to change the mindset of people who have an ingrained discriminatory attitude that has taken root during a long, historical process. How we can change that image is something that we struggle with daily.” That really resonated with me, as it’s the same situation we face in the buraku liberation movement. So developing a sense of solidarity with these people is so natural for us.

There were many pictures from the Nazi era on display there, and the guide told us that the display is intended to show the contrast between the normal lives of the Sinti-Roma people and their history of persecution. He said its purpose is to restore the personalities and rights of each individual person in contrast with the way they were treated by the Nazis, who didn’t consider them human and killed them like rats or fleas. Hitler and his Nazi government promoted “Eugenics” and did experiments on some 30,000 Sinti-Roma people gathering detailed data about their physical characteristics, and based on that defined people with those ethnic characteristics as an inferior race of people who had to be eliminated. They drummed this thinking of racial superiority into the minds of the German people, thus preparing the way for genocide. They forced everyone to produce their family genealogies and if there was any indication of even a small amount of Sinti-Roma in a person’s bloodline, that person would be categorized as Sinti-Roma and sent off to concentration camps where they faced hard labor in horrid conditions and where large numbers of people became the victims of medical experiments, disease and mass slaughter. The Nazis used academic endeavors to justify discrimination and even the use of humans as research animals.

Looking at those pictures of countless victims made me shudder at the thought that people could do this to fellow human beings. It is frightening to think that someone could kill people so easily. At the end of the exhibit, there was a wall covered with numerous registers of name lists, and when one considers that there were many other victims whose records have been lost, it’s really sobering to think of so many people whose lives were taken from them. This is something that must never be forgotten, and I felt how important it is that we all work to see that it never happens again.

The Sinti and Roma Quarter
“Ummenwinkel”
Okamoto Takuya

The town of Ravensburg is located close to Lake Constance, a large lake on the border of Germany, Switzerland and Austria and has a population of almost 50,000. In 1895, the German townspeople decided in their town hall meeting that the Sinti-Roma people were of a different blood, and forced them all to move onto the other side of the river. The area they took up for residence was called Ummenwinkel, and it is still the area where the Sinti-Roma people live. Located between an autobahn highway and a river, there is only one road into the quarter, and thus it is very reminiscent of buraku communities in Japan in its discriminatory geography.

Ms. Magdalena Guttenberger lives there, and she greeted us with the most friendly and welcoming hug and greetings of any that we experienced in Germany. The houses in Ummenwinkel were mostly simple, one-story wooden homes of rough construction. Magdalena and her family make their living by repairing old furniture, gathering and selling scrap metal, etc. Many of the Sinti-Roma are affiliated with the Saint Jodok Catholic Church in Ravensburg. During the war years, 35 Sinti-Roma from that church were sent to Auschwitz, with 29 of those
being killed there. Magdalena’s husband was one of the few survivors. The church and the people of the town did not voice opposition to the Sinti-Roma being sent to the concentration camps, and even today, the elders and priests of the church do not talk about how the church then understood what was happening. The history of discrimination that Magdalena described was her own personal history as well, and the pain of it all oozed out of every word.

One of the forms of present discrimination that Magdalena described was that of education. Since they use the Romani language in the home, the children are not so fluent in German, and so they often become the focus of bullying. Even if they are able to do well academically, they are often not fairly evaluated and are not sufficiently rewarded for their efforts. Thus, they tend to lose their motivation to study. Likewise, parents often don’t have a good understanding of the importance of an education, and so the connection between poverty, education and discrimination sounds very much like the history of buraku discrimination.

Next to the Saint Jodok Church is a plaque with the names of the 29 Sinti-Roma who died in Auschwitz. At the bequest of Magdalena, the church had agreed in 1999 to do that. There were, of course, people who opposed it, but the fact that the church did build such a memorial is significant. Nevertheless, the struggle of the Sinti-Roma to overcome discrimination is still in its beginning stages.

Plaque next to the Saint Jodok Church listing the Sinti-Roma victims of the Holocaust.
What We’ve Accomplished With the Large Donation in 2013 from the Waldensian Evangelical Church of Italy Through EMS

Kobayashi Akira

While several of the activities the BLC engaged in during 2014 were ongoing, yearly activities, we were also able to do several other projects as a result of the funds contributed by the Waldensian Evangelical Church of Italy through the auspices of EMS in Germany. In addition to the Buraku Liberation Youth Seminar, Liberation Plays, the Seminary Human Rights Education Conference and our regular newsletters in both Japanese and English, we also sponsored several new events, including a Youth Seminar Conference of former attendees, the National Social Activist Conference in Aizu, public showings of the movie “Sayama — Until The Invisible Handcuffs Are Removed,” together with presentations by Kazuo Ishikawa himself, along with his wife Sachiko, a study tour to Germany and a book of sermons entitled “Let Line Shine on All of Humanity” that will also have an English translation. The English translation of the 222-page Japanese book is scheduled to be printed in May, and can be pre-ordered now.

In April, the BLC will be sending 2 young Japanese pastors who have been a part of the annual Youth Seminar to the “RomnoKher” event being held by EMS in Berlin, Germany. They are presently studying in Europe, one in Switzerland and the other in Heidelberg, Germany. EMS is also sponsoring another event in Germany next October concerning discriminated-against minorities, and the BLC is planning on sending 2 representatives to give a presentation on the buraku discrimination issue.

Fifty-one years after the “Sayama Incident,” in which a buraku youth, Ishikawa Kazuo, was falsely accused and convicted of murder, a list of 279 pieces of evidence the police hold was finally released in January 2015. We are now in the process of seeking release of the actual evidence that will prove Ishikawa’s innocence.

In October, we will be holding the “Okinawan Caravan,” which takes place some 70 years after the fierce battles that raged on Okinawa in the closing weeks of WWII. The American military is attempting to construct new bases and facilities at both Henoko and Takae, and the local population has been steadfastly resisting this. We want to stand in solidarity with the people who are saying that they don’t want Okinawa to again be involved in war and the destruction of lives, and so the BLC views this issue as one of its own issues.

On March 24, seminary professors will be gathering in Asakusa, Tokyo for our annual Human Rights Symposium. The purpose of this seminar is to encourage the education of new pastors with a vision to ridding society of buraku and other forms of discrimination.

During this time when so many wars are being fought around the world, we want to work together with others of like mind to seek peace, freedom and brotherhood among the peoples of the world through activities that promote love of neighbor. We are deeply grateful for our friends around the world who support us in these efforts.

Crowned With Thorns Editorial Committee

BLC Director Kobayashi Akira, BLC management committee chairperson Higashitani Makoto, Missionary Tim Boyle, Rev. Sato Shigeyoshi, Rev. Oguri Ken, and Rev. Yokoyama Jun’ichi. We appreciate your comments and suggestions concerning this newsletter and how to make improvements. Donations in either Japanese yen or US dollars are greatly appreciated and can be made by personal check.