

EVENT SUMMARY:

The Martyr and the Red Kimono

With author Naoko Abe

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Naoko Abe's talk:

Tonight I am going to talk about my new book: 'The Martyr and the Red Kimono', which was published today. You may find some of the content of my talk today a little bit disturbing, because the focus is about war, but I believe that you will also find the story inspiring, because it features three amazing men, all of whom have left a legacy of hope, peace and humanity. The first man is a Polish priest called Maximilian Kolbe, who was murdered in Auschwitz in 1941, the second is Tōmei Ozaki who became an orphan when the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on the 9th August 1945, and the third is Masatoshi Asari who is the most renowned cherry tree creator in the world, who lives in the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. The two latter men have never met Father Kolbe, but they were deeply influenced by his actions - Father Kolbe gave them a reason to live, and to speak out about the horrors of war.

First, let's look briefly at the life of Father Kolbe, because he is the thread that binds the story together. He was born with the name Raymond in 1894, in a small Russian ruled village in the Western part of present day Poland. At that time, Poland didn't exist as a country- it had been wiped off the map in 1795 when Russia, Prussia, and Austria petitioned it into three parts. Raymond's father Julius was a poor weaver, and his mother Maria was a midwife, and was extremely religious. Julius was a local leader of Polish Patriots who secretly sought to regain independence, so Raymond grew up in a very religious and patriotic atmosphere. He believed that his mission in life was to fight for his country's Liberation as a knight of the Virgin Mary.

At school, Raymond excelled in sciences. He was extremely intelligent and driven, obsessed with the idea of space travel, and therefore his nickname was 'Spaceman'. He was given the religious name of Maximilian when he began training to become a member of a Franciscan order. At the age of 18, in 1912, Maximilian won a scholarship to Rome. It was an eye opening experience for him because it was the home of the Roman Catholic church, and there were fellow students from all over the world.

There he formed an organization within the Franciscan order with six other young friars. He said his goal was to conquer the world with faith, but he thought that conventional methods of preaching to the public were outdated and restrictive- instead he wanted to use the media including the new technology of radio to spread Christianity.

However, whilst in Rome, Kolbe developed tuberculosis, which he suffered with for the rest of his life, but he refused to let his illness get in his way. After graduating with two doctorates, he returned to Poland, which had become independent after the First World War. There, he started printing a magazine. Many Franciscans opposed his methods, so he was exiled to a dilapidated Monastery, where he bought an ancient manual printing press. To everyone's surprise, the magazine became extremely popular because it was written for a mass audience.

In 1927, Kolbe, and a group of Franciscans moved to some land, west of Warsaw, and built a friary there called 'Niepokalanów', which would eventually become the world's largest Catholic institution and become very powerful and influential in Poland. Kolbe still wasn't satisfied; as an incredibly ambitious and impatient man, he wanted to conquer the world. He chose Japan immediately as his first stop, after reading about how the missionary St Francis Xavier had brought Catholicism to Japan in 1549 for the first time. Xavier had initially been very successful, but the Shōgun saw Catholicism as a threat, and banned the religion in 1614, which had led to two centuries of persecution against Catholics in Japan. Kolbe believed that he could make Xavier's dream happen 370 years later.

Over in the Far East were two Japanese boys whose lives would eventually become greatly affected by Kolbe: first was Koichi Tagawa, who would later become known as Tōmei Ozaki. He was born in 1928, on the Northern tip of Korea. As you know, Korea had been a Japanese territory since 1910, and Koichi's parents had come there from Nagasaki. The family lived in a city called Rason. This became a boomtown after Japan set up the puppet state of Manchuria in 1933, because it was on the fastest and shortest route between Japan and Manchuria. Here is a map of Rason. Japanese people went from there to Manchuria, whereas before they had to go all the way around to go to Manchuria. Therefore, Rason became a boomtown. Koichi's family were descendants of so-called hidden Christians who practiced their religion secretly to escape persecution. Koichi and his family were the only Christians in Rason. The other Japanese youngster was Masatoshi Assari. He was born in 1931, in a village in southern Hokkaido. He was the second son of a farmer and his wife.

Now let's return to Kolbe's story. Later, Kolbe obtained permission from his superior to move to Japan. In 1930 he had no money and didn't speak the language; he knew nothing about Japanese culture and his health was appalling. His superior offered him one sentence of advice: grow a long

beard, because men with beards are well respected in the Far East. He chose Nagasaki because it was the center of Japanese Catholicism. Kolbe and the other friars arrived there in April 1930 after 48 days of travel by ship. By then, they'd all grown black beards; naively Kolbe hoped to convert everyone in Japan to Christianity instantly. Within a month, he began printing a magazine in Japanese with lots of help from the Japanese clergy.

A year later, the Polish friars built their own friary on a desolate mountain side at the edge of the city. It was extremely bare and very basic; the windows had no glass, there was no heating in the winter, and the men cooked outside, rain or shine. None of this bothered Kolbe, who slept next to the printing press, and forced the friars to work around the clock to print the magazine. Unfortunately for Kolbe, few Japanese people converted to Christianity. This was because Japan had its own faith and belief systems. The timing was also terrible because the government was promoting an ideology based on worship of the Emperor who was seen as a living God. Short of food and with no time to relax, the friars grew exhausted and sick. Several of them rebelled fiercely against Kolbe, who himself was gravely ill much of the time. Conditions only started to improve when another priest arrived from Poland to become head of the friary, and Kolbe was asked to take on other duties.

In 1936, after 6 years in Japan, Kolbe was called back to Poland to become the head of the friary. As he was leaving, Kolbe said he hoped to 'leave his bones in Japan'. Back in Poland, Kolbe felt almost reborn, as he returned to a familiar culture. Japan had changed him and he had come to realise that he needed to listen more to the Friars. He introduced many Democratic changes and gave the friars more time to relax. Under his leadership the friary grew ever more prestigious and powerful, boasting close to 800 men. The publishing department was particularly successful, printing magazines, books, and a daily newspaper called 'the little daily', which would soon become the largest daily newspaper in Poland. This was the peak of Kolbe's success.

Although he had great ambitions for the future, those plans never happened- Hitler became German Chancellor in 1933, and it was clear by 1939 that the Nazis intended to invade Poland. In response, the friary became a place of spiritual resistance. The Daily Newspaper printed numerous anti-Hitler articles, and caricatured Hitler, while calling for solidarity among Polish people. On September 1st 1939, Germany invaded Poland, which led to the start of the Second World War. Kolbe's life was in danger, but communications between Japan and Poland ceased, so the friar in Nagasaki had no idea of his fate until 7 years later.

In brief, the Germans arrived at the friary in mid September 1939, and arrested Kolbe and 47 Friars. This photo shows them being marched off to an internment camp. They were released 80 days later.

After Kolbe came back, the friary became a sanctuary for displaced people from across Poland, including Polish Jews. Kolbe was rearrested by the Gestapo in February 1941. He was first sent to Pawiak prison in Warsaw, where political prisoners and priests were often tortured, and then to Auschwitz, where he was sent to work on a construction site. Kolbe was continually sick, and often beaten by the guards because he was so slow. Despite this, Kolbe repeatedly told his fellow Polish inmates 'that the Nazis cannot kill the Polish Spirit within us'.

One day, a prisoner escaped from the block where Kolbe lived. All 400 inmates from the block were forced to stand in a square without food or drink until the prisoner was captured. He wasn't found, so the deputy head chose ten inmates to send to a starvation chamber. When one of the men cried out that he had a family, Kolbe stepped forward and volunteered to take his place. The ten men stripped and walked down these stairs to a dark and tiny room underground. Kolbe comforted the terrified men, leading them in prayers and hymns. One by one, the men perished. After two weeks, on 14th August 1941, a German criminal was sent to inject carbolic acid into Kolbe's left arm, killing him instantly.

Let's now switch gears for a moment and remind you about the lives of the two Japanese men. Our second protagonist, Koichi Tagawa was attending the elite junior high school in Korea in early 1941, but at the age of 12 he hurt his lower back very badly, and this developed into spinal tuberculosis. His mother decided to take him to Nagasaki, her hometown for treatment. His father had died 5 years earlier. It was in Nagasaki that Koichi heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor on December the 8th 1941, which pulled the United States into the Second World War.

After being discharged from hospital, Koichi worked at a Mitsubishi factory in Nagasaki making torpedoes. By 1945, it was clear that Japan was losing the war. The Americans started bombing Japan's major cities, including Tokyo, and on the 6th August, 1945, the city of Hiroshima was devastated by the world's first atomic bomb. Three days later, a second atomic bomb exploded over Nagasaki. More than 70,000 residents died in the blast. As we now know, Nagasaki wasn't intended to be the first target of the second atomic bomb, but a series of mistakes and unfortunate circumstances led to this outcome. What few people know was that the bomb detonated almost directly above Asia's largest Cathedral - this was in the Catholic District where Koichi Tagawa and his mother lived. Around 8,500 Catholics died in the bombing out of a total 12,000 Catholics in Nagasaki. Ironically, the chief pilot of the plane that dropped the bomb was a devout Irish American Catholic, and before take off two Christian priests blessed the bomb on the ground. There was total devastation and destruction. An American Research scholar later wrote that 'the Nagasaki strike was the greatest irony of the Second

World War, we Americans fought to defend freedom, but our final Act of combat would be to drop the deadliest bomb ever devised by man onto Japan's most Christian of communities'.

Koichi Tagawa survived the bomb because he was working in an underground tunnel. At two minutes past eleven in the morning, an incredible wind blew into the tunnel, throwing everyone onto the ground. Soon it was filled with hundreds of severely injured and burnt people. Incredibly, Koichi kept a diary, which he shared with me. He also drew maps and pictures of what he did that day. Koichi started walking towards his home to look for his mother- it took him 5 hours, normally it only took him 30 minutes. There were bodies everywhere. Outside the Mitsubishi factory he pulled a young woman from the debris, but he abandoned her when an American plane flew over. He saw a dying colleague with an open belly, but Koichi didn't help him. When he finally reached home it was in flames. He called out for his mother, but no one answered. That night, Koichi wrote in his diary: 'My home has disappeared, engulfed in endless fire. I thought only of my mother, but I could not find her injured body or corpse.'

For 18 days, Koichi camped out on a mountain side with seven relatives. The things he witnessed and wrote about are too appalling to relate here. His relatives died one by one. He burned their bodies, and picked out the bones to put in a family grave. Koichi was now an orphan, aged 17. He cried alone, and poured his soul into his diary. Another quote from his diary: 'I have no clothes, no possessions; without my mother, life is meaningless. All that beckons is a mountain of hardships'.

Two months after the bomb, Koichi knocked on the door of the Nagasaki friary that Kolbe had founded. The friary survived the blast because it was shielded by a mountain miraculously. After months of terror, Koichi found a new home. Japan was in ruins, everyone was tired, hungry, and dispirited. It had been 14 years since Japan had invaded Manchuria. 14 years of almost nonstop war. As you know, General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Japan as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, which occupied Japan until 1952. MacArthur made the Emperor announce that he was no longer a living God. The Americans meanwhile unveiled sweeping policies of demilitarization and democratization. In Nagasaki, the surviving Catholics struggled to understand their predicament. The cathedral destroyed by the bomb had been built as a symbol of Triumph for the hidden Christians over their persecutors, but a lot of them believed that the bombing was a new persecution.

In late 1945, Koichi attended mass with a Polish Friar. A very well respected Catholic doctor called Takashi Nagai said that the bomb was God's providence. Most Catholics in Nagasaki including Koichi believed that theory and they kept their sufferings to themselves, rarely speaking out about their injuries or the radiation that was killing them. Dr Nagai's wife was instantly killed in the blast. His

children survived because they had been evacuated. Nagai himself was seriously ill, dying from radiation poisoning. As I mentioned earlier, the Polish friars in Nagasaki didn't know what happened to Father Kolbe after the German invasion, but in September 1946 a letter arrived from Poland, explaining Kolbe had died.

Koichi Tagawa changed his name to Thomas Koichi. While studying to become a friar, after listening to Kolbe's martyrdom, Koichi was traumatized, and haunted by guilt because he hadn't helped the dying people on the day of the Nagasaki bombing. How was it possible that Kolbe gave up his life to save another human being. He felt that he and all other humans were inherently selfish, and he decided to dedicate his life to understanding Kolbe. Unfortunately, he became gravely ill again, and spent 11 years recovering. After recovery, he made ten trips to Auschwitz, beginning in 1917, to follow in Kolbe's footsteps. Each time he visited the starvation chamber, he said he heard the cries of the dying men, and each time the memories of the bombing day in Nagasaki flooded back to Koichi. Auschwitz and Nagasaki were one and the same: two parallel living hells, two symbols of extreme cruelty. In the starvation chamber, Koichi said he finally understood the true meanings of Kolbe's act; that pure selfless love for others. He felt he could conquer ego and hate, and that life was always worth living, no matter how dire the circumstances.

In 1981, the Polish Pope, John Pope II visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki in his first ever trip to Japan. John Pope made a special visit to the friary founded by Kolbe. In a speech, the Pope said War is the work of man, not God. After hearing this, many Nagasaki Catholics began discussing their personal stories for the first time. Two years later, Ozaki met Francis Gajowiniczek, the man whose life father Kolbe had saved. Gajowiniczek, who was 81, told Ozaki that it was his responsibility to tell the world about Kolbe, and Auschwitz and the atomic bomb back in Nagasaki. Ozaki started visiting schools and institutions to talk about the horrors of war.

Meanwhile, in Hokkaido, our third protagonist Masatoshi Asari survived the end of the war and its aftermath by living on weeds, clovers, locusts and grasshoppers. Asari was haunted by the realization that the entire War had been fought under a false ideology that worshiped the Emperor as God. He felt that he had been lied to by the Japanese government and Military. Mr Asari became a primary school teacher and began to cultivate cherry blossoms in his spare time. He saw the blossoms as symbols of peace and friendship, and he was determined that his pupils would never have to fight in another conflict. In 1965 he created a Peace Park in the town of Mastumae in Hokkaido. Over the next 40 years, he created more than 100 varieties of territories. Today Mastumae Park is the world's biggest cherry park with more than 10,000 trees, spreading from the ocean to the mountains.

Asari was also a historian, and he researched the history of Korean and Chinese labourers, as well as Allied prisoners of War who had been brought to Hokkaido and worked in appalling conditions. As a sign of atonement and reconciliation, Asari sent cherry saplings to places where people had suffered from Japanese aggression, including Beijing, Pyongyang and Windsor Great Park near London. If you buy a cherry tree in Britain today, there's a good chance that it is the offspring of one created in Japan by Asari.

In June 1987, the Japanese television network NHK (the equivalent of the BBC) aired a program about Asari's peace initiatives to other countries. By chance, one viewer was an admirer of Father Kolbe, so she contacted Asari, and asked him to send cherries to Poland. She also sent him one of Ozaki's books about Kolbe. When he read the book, Asari was deeply shocked. He believed Kolbe's act in Auschwitz was the ultimate defiance against evil, and he quickly agreed to send hundreds of cherry saplings to Poland. He wrote in his diary that this was 'the most profound initiative of my life'. In total, Asari sent 420 cherry saplings to Poland. The first batch left Japan in October, 1987. These photos show the cherries being planted at the Niepokalanów friary. Two years later, he sent 40 more saplings to a convent in a village in southern Poland, near the border with Ukraine. The nuns at the convent sent this photo to Asari in 1993, to show him that his cherries had blossomed, but after that Asari heard nothing.

I decided to try and find them after more than 30 years. It took months of research to figure out what had happened to the cherry trees, but in September 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, my husband and I flew to Poland on a cherry hunting expedition. To cut a long story short, most of the cherries had withered and died. However, at the convent, I found leaves on three trees that appeared to be Japanese cherries. I sent them to Mr Asari and later phoned him - he was unusually excited, and said all the leaves were from the saplings he had sent there, two were a variety of cherries from the Hokkaido Mountains, and the third were his creation: the Beni-Yutaka variety. I couldn't believe it - neither could the head of the convent, because the nuns knew nothing about the cherries' history.

There was yet another surprise for me walking through the convent gardens. I came across a statue of the Virgin Mary, dressed in a red kimono with cherry blossoms. It turned out that a Catholic Professor from Japan had commissioned the statue and sent it to the convent to commemorate Father Kolbe's pursuit of peace. It was extremely bizarre to see a Japanese looking statue of Virgin Mary in such a location. Stróżna is a quiet and timeless Polish village. This map shows where it was located in 1938, but since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it's been thrust into the spotlight, because thousands of refugees have passed through Lviv and crossed the border into Poland. The nuns at Stróżna take turns working at a refugee center at the border, helping displaced women and children.

Just a few days ago, I heard that the three surviving cherry trees in Stróżna have blossomed beautifully once again. To me, the trees are a tribute to Father Kolbe, who was formerly named a saint in 1982. The ceremony in Rome was attended by 15,000 people including Tōmei Ozaki. In 1998, Queen Elizabeth II and the Archbishop of Canterbury unveiled the statue of Kolbe on the west porch of Westminster Abbey, next to Martin Luther King and other 20th century martyrs.

Kolbe's friary nowadays is a shadow of its former self, with just over a 100 friars living there, most of them elderly. The three trees also stand in tribute to Ozaki, the atomic bomb survivor who passed away in Nagasaki two years ago, aged 93. The day before he died, he wrote a blog that said 'Small happiness is everywhere, you just don't realize it because you are looking for much bigger happiness'. In other words, enjoy every day and appreciate what you've got. So the only survivor of my tale is Masatoshi Asari, who lives with his wife in Hokkaido, aged 93. I talk to him every week. Mr Asari's generation is dying out, and so it's been left to our generation to ensure that our children and their children understand that wars don't just destroy people and places, they destroy dignity, integrity and humanity. The surviving trees and the Kimono statue are symbols of hope and peace. They represent everyone who died at Auschwitz, in Nagasaki and in countless conflicts. Through the ages, they also represent hope that future generations might eventually learn to live without war, because unless the killing stops, we risk destroying ourselves, our planet and everything we love.