

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

80 Years After the War: Auschwitz, the Atomic Bomb and Japanese Cherry Blossoms

Joint Talk by Naoko Abe and Masatoshi Asari

Thursday 26 June 2025

Abe-san's Talk:

This webinar is part of the Daiwa Foundation's Nichiei Fund series, which is being held to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the post-war era. We would like to thank staff at the Daiwa Foundation for their hard work in organising this webinar. Just next month my book on the theme of war and peace will be published in Japan by Iwanami Shoten. The title of the book is「アウシュヴィッツの聖人を追いかけてーある被爆者と桜守の物語」[*The Pursuit of the Saint of Auschwitz: The Story of a Hibakusha and a Guardian of Cherry Trees*]. This is actually a non-fiction book that recounts events that took place during World War II through the eyes of three protagonists.

Today, we have invited Masatoshi Asari, one of the main characters in the book, so I would like to keep my talk brief and then hear from Asari-san. He has joined us from Hakodate City. In the United Kingdom, where I live, the cherry trees that Asari-san cultivated have spread to various places and are very popular. Asari-san has many fans as well. Today, we have many people from the UK who are involved in the planning process joining us, as well as participants from Ireland and Poland.

The main character of the book is Father Maximilian Kolbe from Poland, who was killed in the Auschwitz concentration camp. The next protagonist is Tōmei Ozaki-san, who survived the atomic bombing in Nagasaki. The third protagonist is Masatoshi Asari-san. The three individuals each lived in different places and had no knowledge of each other, but they shared the experience of an unimaginably horrific wartime experience. Father Kolbe lost his life, but Ozaki-san and Asari-san survived the war and continued to spread messages of anti-war and peace in the postwar era. The three of them are mysteriously connected by fate, with Japan's cherry blossoms, and these are Asari-san's cherry blossoms. The cherry blossoms serve to connect them.

Last year, my book *The Martyr and the Red Kimono* was published in English by Penguin Books in the UK. I translated it into Japanese myself, and now it has been arranged for the Japanese version to be published. There

has been a lot of reaction to the original English text, and, in fact, I was recently approached by the Norwegian Nobel Committee that decides the Nobel Peace Prize. Just the day before yesterday, on the 24th, I met with the Chairman of the Committee in Oslo.

As you may know, the Chairperson of the Nobel Peace Committee, Jørgen Frydnes, was the one who proposed giving the Nobel Peace Prize to Nihon Hidankyo at the end of last year. The chairperson has a deep interest in issues related to atomic bombs and world peace, which is why he has shown interest in the book. When I met with the Chairperson, he said that in order to prevent the use of nuclear weapons and achieve peace, we need to appeal to people in various ways, not just by holding events, but also through music, art and literature. He said: 'By publishing this book, you have contributed to creating that environment.' It was a great honour to receive such gracious words.

Oslo is home to the Nobel Committee and the Nobel Peace Centre, and just by walking through the streets of Oslo, one can feel the atmosphere of a city where the will of the country and its people, who want to promote world peace, is palpable. I thought that it was wonderful to demonstrate such soft power to the international community, especially for Japanese people, who are highly sensitive to peace issues.

Allow me to introduce the contents of the book. Father Kolbe visited Nagasaki in the 1930s before the war and lived there for 6 years, establishing a monastery called *Seibo No Kishi*, which translates to *Garden of the Immaculata*. Father Kolbe was declared a saint by the Catholic Church in the Vatican in 1982. He also appears at length in the well-known novel *Onna no Issho* by the writer Shusaku Endo.

Father Kolbe returned to Poland in 1936 and became the abbot of the Niepokalanow monastery, which he founded on the outskirts of Warsaw in 1928, developing the monastery into one of the world's leading religious facilities. Father Kolbe did not use traditional methods of evangelism. Instead of spreading his message around the world by going to developing countries and preaching, he used a new method to reach countless people around the world: spreading his message through print materials, media, newspapers, magazines and the radio, which had recently been established at the time. I think Father Kolbe had a journalistic side to him.

However, just as the monastery was perfecting its films, the Nazis were on the rise in Germany. Father Kolbe maintained an anti-Nazi stance, which resulted in his arrest by the Nazis in September 1939 after the German invasion of Poland. He was sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1941. During that summer, as punishment for one prisoner escaping, ten men were selected to be starved to death in a bunker. Kolbe volunteered to take the place of one of the prisoners. They were given no food or water, but the priest encouraged and guided the other nine prisoners through prayers and hymns before seeing them off. He continued to survive until the end, encouraging other prisoners by saying: 'There is still a chance for you to get out and be liberated from here, so never give up hope.' Father Kolbe was ultimately killed by a lethal injection of carbolic acid.

The second protagonist, Tōmei Ozaki-san, was born and raised in what was then the Japanese colony of northern Korea, now North Korea. However, he fell seriously ill at the age of 14 and returned to Nagasaki, the birthplace of his parents, with his mother. His father had already died of illness in Korea. Although Ozaki-san recovered from his illness in Nagasaki, at the age of 17 on 9 August 1945, he lost his mother in an instant to the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki. He became an orphan. Ozaki-san himself survived by being underground at the time of the bombing as he worked in a Mitsubishi weapons factory.

After witnessing hell on earth, Ozaki-san lost the will to live, but later he joined the monastery founded by Father Kolbe, *Seibo No Kishi*. He decided to become a Catholic monk. Even after Father Kolbe returned to Poland, the monastery continued to be run by Polish priests and monks. Miraculously, both the monastery and the monks escaped the damage from the atomic bomb as they were located in the shadows of the mountains. Ozaki-san was in Matsue, a hidden town in Nagasaki.

Ozaki-san lived his whole life deeply regretting and feeling guilty for not being able to save the many dying people on the day of the atomic bomb. Upon learning about Father Kolbe, who sacrificed his own life to save others, he was deeply shocked and decided to follow in the priest's footsteps. He visited Poland ten times, each time also visiting the Auschwitz concentration camp to follow the history of Father Kolbe, and published two books about him. This slide shows a photo of Ozaki-san meeting Mr Gajowniczek, the prisoner at Auschwitz that Father Kolbe had replaced and saved. As a storyteller, Ozaki-san continued to spread messages opposing atomic bombs and war, and kept the memory of Father Kolbe alive. Ozaki-san passed away in May 2012 at the age of 93.

The third protagonist is Masatoshi Asari-san. Having been educated in a militaristic environment, Asari-san was deeply shocked when Japan lost the war at the age of 14, realising that he had been receiving the wrong education, which glorified the Emperor. After the war, he reflected on the causes of war and what it brought about. After graduating from university, he became a teacher, but he took Japan's war responsibility very seriously and continued to investigate what the Japanese military did in Hokkaido during the war. Koreans and Chinese labourers were taken to Hokkaido and forced to work in railroad construction projects and coal mining under harsh conditions alongside prisoners of war from various parts of Asia who were brought in and subjected to unfair treatment. These people were the subject of Asari-san's investigation. Many people lost their lives as a result of such actions by Japan. Although most of the documents related to the incident had been incinerated by the authorities at the time of defeat, Asari-san visited the witnesses who were still alive at the time, painstakingly collecting evidence and gradually revealing the truth, as if putting together a jigsaw puzzle. This slide is a compilation of the results of various surveys that Asari-san conducted and presented.

Asari-san has also achieved great success as a prominent cherry tree breeder. A total of 116 new varieties of cherry blossoms were created after the war, collectively known as Matsumae cherry blossoms, and they have been planted and loved all over the world. Asari-san is the only person in the world who has made so many cherry blossoms. Based on his belief that war must never happen again, as well as his belief that cherry blossoms are a

symbol of peace, Asari-san has been continuing his peace activities by sending cherry blossoms overseas on his own. I think it is a very unique achievement accessible only to Asari-san, combining, as he did, his research work as a historian with his work as a cherry breeder. Countries that have been given cherry blossoms by Asari-san include South Korea, China, North Korea, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada – primarily countries that Japan invaded or caused trouble for during the war. However, other countries are also included. Cherry blossoms were sent free of charge in the hope of making amends for Japan's past wrongdoings and building friendly relations for the future.

Asari-san's cherry blossoms arrived in the UK in 1993. There were 58 types of cherry blossoms, including Matsumae cherry blossoms, which were then grafted and propagated. The scions were then sent to Windsor Great Park, a large park owned by the British Royal family. The reason that Asari-san sent the cherry blossoms was that he wanted to make amends for the acts that the Japanese military committed against British prisoners of war, and hoped that it would contribute to the future friendship between the two countries. At the time, the issue of Japanese prisoners of war had escalated and become a diplomatic problem with Britain. The cherry blossom saplings were promptly grafted by British cherry blossom specialist Chris Sanders and planted in the garden. Today, I think Chris Sanders has also joined us. They then multiplied further and spread from garden to garden. Today, many of Asari-san's Matsumae cherry trees are planted in major gardens across the UK, where they bloom beautifully.

Asari-san's cherry blossoms serve as a bridge connecting Japan and the United Kingdom as peace ambassadors. In fact, Asari-san also sent 420 cherry trees to Poland in the late 1980s. This was in memory of Father Kolbe. Asari-san views in Father Kolbe's actions self-sacrifice in protest against the evil of the Nazis, and an example of ultimate humanity and human dignity in saving a life. He was deeply moved by Father Kolbe's life and death, and wanted to honour his message of peace and humanity by sending his beloved cherry blossoms. According to Asari-san, this was the biggest project of his life. He believed that the anti-war message and empathy for the oppressed he had been pursuing were encapsulated in the actions of Father Kolbe. This slide shows a photograph I came across during my research of the cherry blossoms that Asari-san brought to Poland, taken when Asari-san's cherry tree was planted in Niepokalanów Monastery in Poland, which Father Kolbe founded. It was from nearly 40 years ago.

In my book, Asari-san's cherry blossoms play an important role as a symbol connecting the three protagonists. Unfortunately, most of the 420 cherry blossoms sent by Asari-san could not withstand Poland's harsh winter, as well as the country's transition from a communist to a democratic state. However, in my cherry blossom tracking investigation, three of them were found in a small village called Strachocina, near the border with Ukraine in southeastern Poland, at a monastery associated with Father Kolbe. I discovered that they have been blooming for 35 years. This slide shows the *Beni-yutaka* cherry blossoms. These photos were taken by someone from the monastery and sent to me. Today, we are joined by some nuns from the monastery.

Asari-san's cherry blossoms serve as a living testimony of the three protagonists, who advocated for peace and a love of humanity, and continue to spread messages of peace every year with their beautiful blossoms. The village of Strachocina, a city famous for its cherry blossoms, has become a region that has attracted global attention since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. The nuns here worked hard to care for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war. The evacuees all passed by Asari-san's cherry blossom trees to take refuge. It seemed to me as if Asari-san's cherry blossoms had guided them to a safe place.

Next to Asari-san's cherry blossoms stand a statue of the Virgin Mary wearing a red kimono with a Japanese face. The cherry blossoms and the statue of Mary honour Father Kolbe, and quietly send out a message of peace and humanity. It is not just the war in Ukraine; now the Israel-Gaza war has also erupted, escalating global conflict. Russian President Vladimir Putin has hinted at the possible use of nuclear weapons, and American President Donald Trump is plunging the world into chaos with his nationalist policies. I believe that the messages of peace from the three people featured in my book offer a ray of hope and light to us living in this turbulent era today. Asari-san's three surviving cherry blossoms in Strachocina continue to embody his strong desire for peace and friendship, rather than war.

Q&A with Asari-san, led by Abe-san:

Abe-san: I would now like to welcome Asari-san here. I would like to ask you a question.

After the war, you created 116 new varieties of cherry blossoms known as Matsumae cherries, and they spread throughout the world. You are the only person in the whole world who has created so many new cherry blossoms like this, but what was the motivation for creating so many?

Asari-san: I felt that I needed to do some independent research to scientifically solve the mysteries surrounding cherry blossoms, and so this project began. We established five research methods, and with the support of Dr Takenaka from the National Institute of Genetics, as well receiving precious cherry trees from Osaka and obtaining traditional cherry blossoms such as the very old Nara-yae cherry blossoms from Kyoto, we planted them in Matsue so that anyone, from children to adults, could enjoy them, in an attempt to give an unprecedented appreciation of cherry blossoms.

Abe-san: For over 70 years, you have been breeding and caring for cherry blossoms with deep affection and passion. In 1969, Matsumae Park was built in Matsumae Town in Hokkaido, where over 10,000 diverse cherry blossom trees of more than 250 varieties have been planted, including many Matsumae cherry trees created by you. Every year, many people come to see the beautiful cherry blossoms. What is it about cherry blossoms that has allowed you to have such a passion for them for so many years? Tell us a bit about what cherry blossoms mean to you.

Asari-san: It is a sense of responsibility towards the life of cherry blossoms. By the end of 1955 in Matsumae, there were about 15 species of wild and cultivated trees, totaling around 200. In accordance with the research plan, I had to collect Japan's precious cherry blossom trees and study their characteristics. Even though we asked to open the branches, it was not so easy to just cut the branches off and give them away as these were valuable cherry blossoms. In particular, in the Military Expansion Bureau, it was forbidden to hand over any documents from the Planning Bureau, which were to be kept secret from the outside. There have been times when negotiations lasted five years or even longer. However, I received their understanding, and they accepted the request for the rush order. In Matsumae, we now have all the representative cherry blossoms seen in the Nara, Heian, Kamakura, Muromachi and Edo periods, as well as present-day cherry blossoms. I have shouldered the weight of responsibility for the lives of the cherry blossoms and human compassion. Responsibility is my treasure. This sense of responsibility has led me to cultivate cherry blossoms for a long time. I personally think it is a wonderful achievement.

Abe-san: Asari-san created the Matsumae Sakura Children's Club at the school where he taught, and had the students help plant seeds and take care of the cherry trees. What did you want to teach the children through cherry blossoms?

Asari-san: Well, helping them learn about the cherry blossoms that are close to home was also an important part of my job. However, Matsumae is a region surrounded by mountains and the sea, with fishing as the primary industry. This makes the town dependent on nature. The purpose was to connect the mountains and sea, and to teach the importance of protecting nature. When cherry trees grow in the mountains, cedar leaves flow into the river and then into the sea, serving as food for plankton, and rich nutrients flow into the sea from the river, allowing seaweed and coastal animals to thrive. In spring, we plant seedlings grown by ourselves in the mountains or parks. In the summer we go to the coast to collect seaweed, observe marine animals laying eggs and make seaweed products. It helped the children understand the connections with living things.

There is a souvenir from Matsumae called *Matsumae tsukemono* from Matsumae, and the main ingredient, thin kelp, does not thrive well. Therefore, we actively collected plastic waste, wood debris, household waste and cleaned up sandy beaches to beautify the nature there. We also held exhibitions in parks to raise awareness of the project. As more people learned about it, we received encouragement from the Nature Conservation Society. I think it was very good to have taught them about nature conservation.

Abe-san: As a historian, you have been working tirelessly to uncover what happened in Hokkaido during World War II. This slide shows you interviewing witnesses involved in the events that happened. As I mentioned earlier, it is about the labourers brought to Hokkaido from Korea and China, as well as former prisoners of war from the Allied forces. These matters later developed into diplomatic issues with the countries involved, but I think what is amazing about Asari-san is that he drew attention to these issues, uncovered the facts and brought them to the world's attention. What was your motivation for conducting this kind of historical excavation work?

Asari-san: Our country, Japan, was also engaged in a war of aggression against China during World War II. There was a time when Japan invaded China, massacring many civilians, burning down villages and forcibly taking many people from there and Korea to Japan to do harsh work in coal and metal mines.

In the summer of 1943, I met a young Korean man named Kazuo Takemoto, who had escaped from a coal mine and sought refuge in a nearby farm. We became friends. He wore rags and appeared very hungry. When I told my mother about this young man, she said: 'Befriend him and bring him home, and make sure to feed him potatoes and pumpkins. Under any circumstances, it is absolutely unacceptable to make fun of or discriminate against Koreans or Chinese or show hostility towards them. Bring him home anytime and become good friends with him.' I have remembered these words for decades without forgetting them.

After the war, I worked hard to interview soldiers who went to Korea and China to find out what they did specifically on the orders of their country. I was disappointed that the Japanese soldiers committed acts of aggression in China and inflicted damage on the people of Korea. After that, I relearned the history of Japan, China and Korea from ancient times to the present. What could I do? This point of being 'united by a horse' does not atone for the sins committed. The important thing is to have hearts connected by peace and security. However, Japan is often suspected of engaging in spy activities when it comes to dealing with communist countries. Well, it wasn't easy.

Abe-san: Through such activities as a historian, you continued to donate thousands of cherry blossom trees, starting with the ones you created, as a form of apology to the countries that Japan caused problems during the war. As you said, it was not an easy journey. For example, when you sent cherry blossoms to North Korea in 1989, you were suspected by the authorities of being North Korean spies. Engaging in such peace-giving activities must have been extremely difficult, but I would like to hear your thoughts and impressions once again.

Asari-san: What made me the happiest was the cherry blossoms that grew in Poland with the help of Father Kolbe's monastery. Unfortunately, there was no detailed report on what caused the trees to wither. When I sent the trees, I also gave the person in charge documents that explained in detail how to plant cherry blossom trees properly, techniques for growing them and how to care for them on a daily basis. I have no doubt that there was a natural disaster. However, there was no further contact afterwards. The sole responsibility for sending them lies with me.

At that time, I wanted to deeply understand Father Kolbe as a person. I became interested in his youth. He spent seven years in Rome and studied hard at the Vatican. He studied philosophy at the Gregorian University for three years and was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy in October 1915. He was 21 years old at that time. In order to further his education, he went to Seraphicum International College and obtained a degree in Theology. Father Kolbe looked back on that time and said: 'I have never paid attention to anything outside the Vatican in Rome.' It was clear that he was a very dedicated student.

The priest eventually came to Japan to spread his teachings. After being taught by Father Kolbe, Yonagashiro-san, a Catholic priest, said the following: 'Father Kolbe had very beautiful eyes. I was taught philosophy in Latin, but he spoke very slowly to ensure everyone understood. The teacher wanted to make sure that everyone understood. The teacher encouraged us, and was very happy when we were able to answer even a little, saying it was good to try. I really felt that this was the kind of beauty that is characteristic of an educator.' I thought that if there is hope because of such a fine priest, I would like to send cherry blossoms to him as many times as necessary. I wanted to dedicate the cherry blossoms in this monastery to Father Kolbe. With that in mind, we put in a lot of effort and sent them.

Abe-san: The first time I heard the story about you sending 420 cherry blossom trees to Poland was in 2018 from my professor. I was very interested in what happened to the cherry blossoms later, so I promised the professor that I would investigate and follow up on it. But the professor discouraged me, saying that all the people involved have already passed away. But we started the investigation anyway. It was extremely difficult, and I thought it might be impossible halfway through, but gradually the truth emerged and I found out that three cherry blossoms still remained. Shortly after discovering those three cherry blossom trees, the Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred, and many refugees escaped to the cherry blossoms. It was a very fateful event, and the place gathered attention from all over the world. What do you think about the fact that these three cherry blossoms remained?

Asari-san: When I look at the photo now, I am filled with so much joy. The cherry blossoms that we sent to Strachocina were chosen because they have strong vitality and can grow for over 100 years if grown normally in Japan. Seeing them surviving in such a harsh environment, unlike that of Japan, I feel truly grateful to the people who helped grow and nurture those cherry trees. The Oyama cherry, Chishima cherry and Miyama cherry seeds were washed and sown in the field, and then were sent off to the Strachocina Monastery. I asked my younger brother to participate. The reason for this is that we thought we could create a system where we would immediately be able to cooperate if requested by another country. In everything we do, we always think about the best direction and work together to carry it out. In order to send it overseas, the products must pass inspection by the country. If bacteria or harmful insects are found, even just one, they must all be disposed of. Therefore we must also create healthy soil. It was very difficult at the time, but when I look back at the photos, I'm really glad I did it.

Abe-san: This is the red kimono statue of the Virgin Mary that I mentioned earlier. Today Asari-san's cherry blossoms have spread widely overseas, and even in the UK where I live. You can almost always find many of these trees. You can find them at Oxford University's Arboretum, as well as in Ireland's Blarney Castle and Gardens. There are many people whose interest in Japan has deepened after seeing the cherry blossoms. I truly think that cherry blossoms are like peace ambassadors. Looking at the world today, we see the Ukraine War and the Israel-Gaza conflict, major wars occurring, with the leaders of major powers falling to a nationalistic approach, putting the world in a state of crisis. In this turbulent world, seeing the beautiful cherry blossoms bloom all over the world greatly soothes my heart, and they are a symbol of the importance of peace. Rather than hating and

fighting each other, we should coexist and collaborate together. Asari-san, I would like to hear your thoughts on the role that Japanese cherry blossoms can play in this turbulent world.

Asari-san: First of all, as a form of soft power, the cherry blossom trees sent to the Potomac 120 years ago are still very popular and have become representative of soft power. I believe that cherry blossoms have the power to soothe people's hearts and connect their souls. Cherry blossoms grow into large trees in countries in the northern hemisphere and have the characteristic of blooming flowers all over the tree. They are often seen in green spaces, parks and public places. They bloom in the forest, and even alongside roads in cities, lining long avenues. Even if only one tree remained, it would still be a magnificent sight to behold. I believe they have the power to open people's hearts and bring joy. People in the future will perceive them, and express it in things like poetry, painting, music, drama, literature and so on. By connecting it to cultural activities, it enriches the cultures of countries around the world. There are people who live in reality through connections with other people, and among them I found myself living with cherry blossoms as my friends.

In recent times, human connections have been cut off due to national borders, religions, gender discrimination and more. Japan and the UK have had a strained relationship until recent years, but it has been repaired. There was a sense of resentment among the British people because in World War II Japan inflicted terrible damage on the British people. On this, I reflected deeply and was determined to atone for those actions through the cherry blossoms. The British have accepted my gesture. Of the 58 varieties of cherry blossoms we sent, they successfully established 56 types. This is a mutually beneficial accomplishment. Britain is a leading horticultural country, and they have taken Japanese cherry blossoms and transformed them into British ones. It thus engendered connections between people. I believe that this spirit of tolerance will spread throughout the world along with the cherry blossoms, and that it will become a bond of deep connection. Cherry blossoms contain a lot of soft power. People have much more, so I hope that people and the cherry blossoms will come together and connect with each other.

Abe-san: Thank you very much. Even at the age of 94, Asari-san's passion for cherry blossoms has not diminished at all: it is just as it was before. Even today, you are continuing to cultivate and plant cherry trees. Asari-san, please tell us a little about your life these days. In the future, what kind of things do you want to do regarding cherry blossoms?

Asari-san: I have published a book about the cherry blossoms at the Matsumae Shin-Sakura Center this April. In Matsumae Park, there is the largest cherry tree in Japan. The book is a simple summary of how the cherry trees that were introduced into Matsumae Park 10 years ago have grown. Among these are the English-born cherry trees, Belgian cherry trees, as well as ones from South America, all of which are arranged so that you can see them straight away. In addition, there are cherry blossoms that were born in ancient Japan called Manoga and were imported from Japan and grown in England by Dr Engram. It then became extinct in Japan. Knowing this, Dr Engram sent us some cherry blossoms of this type after World War II. Through this book, I have developed the idea of communication, including the cherry blossoms that have been cherished by humanity.

Abe-san: Thank you very much, Asari-san.

Q&A with audience members:

Jason James: May I start with a question. Many of you may already know, but there is a project called the Sakura Project in Britain where they are planting cherry blossoms nationwide. I believe there are already 8,000 trees. Abe-san was also involved in that project. I heard that there are three types; how did you choose them? Did you consult with Asari-san before selecting them?

Abe-san: When selecting a variety, I strongly felt the importance of diversity like Collingwood Ingram, who introduced Japanese cherry blossoms to Britain, so I really wanted to treasure diversity. My first symbolic choice was the famous *Ingram*, the cherry blossom that was brought back to Japan. Another one is, of course, the *Somei Yoshino*, which is the most beloved and widely planted cherry blossom in Japan. Another one I really wanted to include was Asari-san's cherry blossom, the *Beni Yutaka* variety. Those were the three that were decided. Therefore, these three types of cherry blossoms, now totaling 8,000 trees, have been planted all over the UK.

Audience member: Abe-san, your commitment to the investigation was truly wonderful, where did your motivation for that come from?

Abe-san: I went to meet Asari-san many times and was taken to see cherry blossoms at Matsumae Park. I listened to all his stories, and among them, the project in Poland left a strong impression on me. I wanted to know more, as a journalist, and was determined to continue until I reached a conclusion. During the investigation process, various historical facts kept emerging, leading the story to involve the main characters, Masatoshi Asari and Father Kolbe. Later on, it connected to Tōmei Ozaki, creating a grand story with these three individuals. Along the way, it expanded beyond World War II and the atomic bomb. At some point, I felt that dealing with atomic bombs and war might be overwhelming, but once I started, I wanted to see it through, taking a total of seven years. During this time, both Asari-san and Ozaki-san opened their hearts to me until the end, sharing stories about wartime and post-war experiences. I felt compelled to convey the messages of these three individuals, especially those of Asari-san and Ozaki-san, as the last surviving generation that lived through World War II. I think I was able to complete it because I was constantly driven by such a strong feeling that I had to leave it behind no matter what.

I sincerely thank Asari-san and Ozaki-san for finding and providing all those wonderful diaries they wrote back in the old days, such as those about the cherry blossoms Asari-san sent to Poland. There are still many stories I haven't heard yet. Ozaki-san had a camp life for three weeks from the 10th day of the atomic bomb, and at the age of 17, he wrote detailed diaries from the day before the atomic bomb until the 10th. We were also provided with that, and I really want to leave it behind not only for myself but also for others. I had such a strong feeling

of wanting to preserve it. The cherry blossoms served as a constant thread throughout the story, symbolising Asari-san's feelings as a single ray of hope and connecting the three. The plot naturally unfolded through the cherry blossoms. That's the truth.

Audience member: Abe-san, when you see Asari-san's cherry blossoms in different countries, is there a message attached from Asari-san, like a note?

Abe-san: Asari-san's messages aren't actually attached to the cherry blossoms themselves, but they are adorned with the name of the Matsumae cherry blossom. As for me, regarding cherry blossoms, British people love cherry blossoms very much and have given me opportunities to talk about it everywhere, so each time, I have extensively discussed Asari-san's activities.

Audience member: Asari-san, is there a message you want to pass on to the next generation? Thank you very much.

Asari-san: Firstly, cherries are not simply about saying this is good and that is good – it's about creating responsible individuals. We must raise and nurture individuals with a strong sense of responsibility, showcasing the good things and distinguishing them from the not-so-good things. I believe that developing empathy is also very important.

Audience member: I would be grateful if Asari-san could express his deep love for humanity in one word. I'm from Hiroshima. I deeply respect you and your achievements from the bottom of my heart, and your strong belief in advancing towards world peace through cherishing the cherry blossoms resonates with me deeply.

Asari-san: Father Kolbe left us a message of love and peace. He said: 'Wars are the work of humans. Wars are death. Wars are destruction. Let's stop wars.' I have inherited this strong message from Father Kolbe and want to engrave in our hearts as well.

Audience member: In Keele University's cherry blossom collection, it states on the seed introduction page that the seeds were created by Asari-san, right?

Abe-san: Yes, there are over 200 varieties of cherry blossoms at Keele university, and all 56 of Asari-san's works that were taken to England have been completed. The Sakura Team at Keele University, which has achieved remarkable results, has been taken care of by Chris Sanders, who performed grafting on Asari-san's cherry blossoms. At Keele University, all of Asari-san's cherry blossoms have been nurtured and taken care of very well. It has formed part of a magnificent landscape every year during the cherry blossom season, and recently received recognition from the Japanese ambassador, with its outstanding achievements being highly valued.

Audience member: I was moved by Asari-san and Abe-san's strong feeling of responsibility. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for connecting the facts that transcend time and place, Abe-san. I was also moved by the episode of Asari-san's mother. All the sisters of Strachocina send their gratitude and greetings.

Abe-san: Thank you, Julia Nakagawa-san, the only Japanese nun of Strachocina's convent, who wrote that comment. It seems that those three surviving cherry blossoms of Asari-san's were carefully preserved by the head of the lead committee, by surrounding them with stones in the garden of the girls' convent so that their roots would not be stepped on. There were concerns recently that the cherry blossoms might be a little weak, so advice was sought from Asari-san. Those cherry blossoms represent Asari-san's passion, and I sincerely hope that they will continue to bloom vigorously ahead and stay healthy for a long time to come.

Audience member: Cherry blossoms from the UK and Europe are not very well known in Japan, and I would like for there to be more promotion of them in Japan.

Abe-san: Every time there is an opportunity, I try to promote them. The best feature of the cherry blossom landscape in England is definitely its diversity. This is because Collingwood Ingram, who introduced cherry blossoms to England and became captivated by them at the beginning of the 20th century, valued diversity the most. I think it also connects to the philosophy and thoughts of Asari-san. He always says that cherry blossoms have a diversity that is not limited to just one type. The best characteristic of Matsumae Park is its variety, with over 250 types and more than 10,000 cherry blossoms gathered together, which is a magnificent sight, so I hope everyone will come and see if you have the opportunity.

From the Tsugaru Strait through to the Matsumae Castle, all the way there are cherry blossoms comprising the backdrop. This magnificent scenery combines traditional and modern cherry blossoms, including the new cherry blossoms of Asari-san. It is truly rare, so I hope more and more people, including foreigners, will come and see.

Jason James: Thank you very much for your interesting and enjoyable conversation today, Abe-san and Asari-san. Thank you to everyone who participated.