

The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

For the first time in my life, I witnessed an elderly man cry – for the actions of his country, during World War II! He was a Japanese gentleman who was only a toddler when Japan surrendered, thus ending that horrible conflict which resulted in more than 120 million people, being killed, and at least an equal number, being maimed for life. To put into context those 240 million people, being killed and maimed, it is equal to about 4 times the human population of the United Kingdom, today, and about equal to the entire human population of the United States of America. I sat in that restaurant, watching this wonderful man cry as he recalled those tragic years of World War II when his country, without warning, declared war on most parts of Asia and, ultimately, on the world. Having wiped away the tears from his eyes, he looked at me and said: 'I don't mind you, seeing me cry. I cry for what has happened, during the war ... It was terrible! ... I do not understand the reason that my people would ...' and, then, he cried a little more. It all started when I was talking to him about a movie that I had just finished watching, relating the history, from Japan's point of view, of the last voyage of The Yamato, an 18-storey tall, Japanese battleship which was sunk off the coast of Okinawa on April 7, 1945, in the dying days of the war. Most of the 3,000-plus Japanese sailors on The Yamato were killed by US fighter and torpedo planes. The Japanese high command had ordered the suicide mission of this battleship; everybody on board the vessel, which, at the time, was the best in the world, knew, fully well, that there was little chance of survival because, among other things, the ship did not have sufficient fuel for the return journey to Kure, Japan. On discussing this part of history, this Japanese gentleman told me that 'his' people had been misled by the military machinery of Japan and that even Emperor Hirohito knew of the situation, contrary to that which most people allege – and the Emperor did nothing. It seems that the military high command of Japan, just before the 1945 surrender, told the people of Tokyo and those of other major cities of Japan to arm themselves with spears and to fight the 'invaders' when they landed on Japanese soil to the last man and woman. Wooden spears against modern guns! It boggles the imagination.

But that was the Japan of yesteryear, I have learned, because the culture of this 2,000-year-old civilisation does not sponsor such acts of brutality. Expansionism may have been the reason that Japan, originally, waged war on China and most parts of Asia, but, in the end, it seems that the military generals were bent on leaving the country with only corpses when the Americans landed. In Okinawa, in 1945, sadly, the Japanese generals were highly successful in misleading the civilian population since many of the Japanese civilians of this island base did as they were told and committed suicide and, before they died, they helped others to die, sometimes by bludgeoning them to death. The horror of it, all! Yet, as I have learned, the Code of Bushido is a code which teaches one how to live with honour, not with dishonour. The Code of Bushido was based on such virtues as rectitude, endurance, frugality, courage, politeness, veracity, and, especially, loyalty to the ruler and country. Only through the exercise of these virtues could a noble man maintain his honour; and, one who had forfeited honour was compelled to commit suicide by hara-kiri. The term, hari-kiri, ritual suicide, is used to signify any suicide, performed for the sake of personal honour. Personal honour, clearly, is one of the most-important attributes of the Japanese and, clearly, personal honour is not synonymous with those horrors that took place, during World War II when Japanese troops attacked and conquered a large part of Asia, following the unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1942, by more than 100 Japanese warplanes. The ignominy of that attack will never be forgotten, of course, and my Japanese friend – and I do consider him to be a wonderful friend, now – cannot understand how his people could have committed such atrocities on the innocent American people at Hawaii, people who were totally unprepared to go to war. Had the Japanese Imperial Navy followed through with the attack on Pearl Harbour, the

chances were high that Hawaii would have been theirs for the taking. But a wrong decision by the Japanese Government deprived the country of a complete victory on that day in 1942 and resulted in the awakening of a mighty power which, ultimately, helped to crush the Japanese Empire.

Many Chinese people, still, do not forgive the Japanese for that country's acts in days of yore, and one cannot, completely, close one's eyes to the ignominious acts of those in power in Tokyo, during World War II. And one should not forget, also. The Government of Japan, today, while admitting to most of the mistakes of the past, continues to rub salt into the wounds, left in the 'flesh' of China by the Japanese invasion which lasted from 1937 to 1945. The Sino-Japanese Conflict, as it is known, today, was a tragedy, brought about by Japan, alone. Yet, the Japanese Government of today continues to censor its textbooks in order to put a slant on historical facts so that its youth will not be told the facts. It is a true sign of the nobility to see and hear at least one Japanese gentleman cry for the crimes of his people of yesteryear and to apologise for acts which were not of his doing. The scars of World War II are deep, but deeper, it seems, is the sadness that at least one Japanese man feels for the acts of his forefathers. What this man has taught me, among other things, My Dear Grandchild, is that one should not blame an entire race for the acts of a few misguided miscreants: Time must be the healer of all wounds. From history one may learn about the future. That is one of the many values of studying this discipline.

Talk to you, next week.

Chief Lady

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