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THE ZEIT GIST

## **Family of POW makes appeal to Aso 'honor'** **Aussies used as forced labor still owed wages for mine work**

By CHRISTOPHER REED

Japan's foreign minister, Taro Aso, will this week receive an appeal to his "honor and decency" in the repayment of a small family debt more than 60 years old.

The request comes in a personal letter from Australian nurse Marilyn Caruana on behalf of her father, John William Hall, now 87, and formerly employed by Aso's father, Takakichi, as forced labor while a prisoner of war at the family coal mine in Kyushu in 1945. The debt is Hall's unpaid wages.

He was one of 197 Australian prisoners (two of whom died) and 101 British held at Camp 26 in Fukuoka Prefecture, which supplied men to the Yoshikuma pit belonging to Aso Mining Co., now the Aso Group.

They were held in slave-like conditions, almost starved, and worked deep seams that constantly collapsed. Taro Aso, 65, who ran the firm from 1973-79, has never acknowledged his family company's illicit employment of prisoners.

Nobody knows how much money is owed to the prisoners, or even exactly who should pay whom -- but on Japanese government wartime orders, they should have been paid a few



John William Hall, an Australian ex-POW, is pictured with (from left to right) granddaughter Cammay and daughters Marilyn and Joan. Marilyn is writing to Foreign Minister Taro Aso claiming that his family's company owes her father unpaid wages.

yen a week. Yet of the thousands of POWs held in wartime Japan and forced to work, few are known to have received a penny.

Marilyn Caruana's father and eight other Australian inmates of Camp 26 interviewed were astounded and several expressed displeasure about Japan's having appointed to high office somebody who appears to have ignored such an important ethical issue.

"I would like to give Mr. Aso a piece of my mind," said Joe Coombs, 85, of Regent's Park, New South Wales, a former infantry corporal who toiled at the Aso mine and never received his wages.

"I'd like to tell him what happened; the beatings, the starvation diet, the back-breaking work, the danger."

Coombs, like Hall and each of their POW fellows, wish to avoid any impression of seeking large reparation funds from Japan. They also acknowledge receipt of 25,000 Australian dollars each in 2001 as goodwill compensation from the Australian government. But the wages are legitimate back pay.

In her letter to Aso, whose family link to her father's wartime experience she learned about through media inquiries, Caruana asks for the cash and an apology. She tells Aso that her signalman "dad" was captured in Singapore in 1942 and taken to Japan, where he remained until 1945, first working in a shipyard and then at Aso Mining.

She writes: "He endured tremendous hardships. He worked 12 hours a shift for 13 days, then 1 day off to do his washing. He lived on 3 cups of half-cooked rice a day. Dad tells us the dangerous, treacherous conditions the workers endured."

In a direct appeal to Aso, she continues: "As your father was the mine owner, he allowed the prisoners to be treated in a shocking, inhumane way. My father is now 87 and he is very disabled due to the effects of those conditions. My request to you on behalf of my father is to give him a written apology and remuneration for his suffering over the years."

Her final paragraph states: "As you are the foreign minister, please do not quote Geneva conventions, peace treaties, court cases, or any of those legal matters. Responding

favorably to this request would be the honorable and decent thing for you to do. Your dad owes my dad some money for work done."

In fact, Japan has never paid any personal money to enslaved POWs because of various legal protections. Although Japan signed the 1929 Geneva Convention that outlawed POW forced labor, no ratification followed.

And as recently as Friday, a Tokyo appeals court dismissed a law suit against 10 Japanese firms filed by 42 Chinese forced into wartime work. Although the court acknowledged illegal enslavement, it was consistent with previous rulings in rejecting any legal redress.

Various pacts, from the 1951 San Francisco Multilateral Peace Treaty to later ones with South Korea and China, protect Japan against compensation payments.

But when they were signed, the extent of Japan's war crimes -- the sexual degradation of Asian "comfort women," for instance -- was unknown. In the POWs' case, Tokyo pleaded lack of funds in 1951. The U.S. accepted this and persuaded reluctant allies to agree, but it is now strenuously disputed.

It was part of what the leading authority on POW payment, Linda Goetz Holmes, an author and history adviser to the Japanese Imperial Records Interagency Working Group in Washington, describes as Tokyo's "masterful con game."

She adds: "Japanese corporate CEOs, who made millions in wartime profits, led Americans to believe they were virtually penniless, and might need to turn to the Soviets for help if we didn't provide it."

Yet the honor argument, touched upon in Caruana's letter, has also reached high levels of government.

According to Holmes, as the Clinton administration ended in 2000, the deputy U.S. secretary of state, Thomas Pickering, advised the new Japanese ambassador, Shunji Yanai, that despite the 1951 treaty, Japan "does have a moral obligation to them (POWs), and you should look into doing something about it." Nothing has been done.

U.S. scholar **William Underwood** is investigating Japan's wartime forced labor for a Kyushu University research project. In addition to the POW cash, which is most probably still sitting in Japan's Postal Savings system, the total worth of unpaid cash for Asian slave workers could be as much as \$ 2 billion, he believes.

But Japanese corporations, government departments, as well as Japanese banks, which are thought to be holding funds unpaid to the Asians, are pursuing a "six-decade record of coverup, dishonesty, and denial," he says.

"Can Japan realistically expect historical reconciliation as long as it evades honest accounting of past conduct?"

Marilyn Caruana says: "Allowing Mr. Aso to be a leading public figure, especially foreign minister, when he comes from such a background, reflects badly on Japan.

"Dad is a soft gentle person who welcomes all regardless of color or race. But Mr. Aso's dad still owes my dad some money. It should be paid."

*Do you think Foreign Minister Taro Aso should have to apologize for or acknowledge his family's wartime link to forced labor? E-mail [community@japantimes.co.jp](mailto:community@japantimes.co.jp)*