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https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=619207707

ROUGH TRANSLATION podcast

(major source but not interviewed on air)

< The Apology Broker >

June 13, 2018

GREGORY WARNER, HOST:

As the parent of small children, I do a lot of apology coaching. Say sorry, I'll say. No, that's not a real sorry. Say it again. Like you mean it. I can take on this role because I am an adult. I know how a sorry is supposed to sound.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #1: Comedian and actor Louis C.K. has responded to accusations...

WARNER: Though recently, I've come to wonder...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #1: Here is his statement.

WARNER: ...In the avalanche of public apologies spawned by the Me Too movement, there was one from the comedian Louis C.K.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #1: I learned yesterday the extent to which I left these women, who admired me, feeling badly about themselves.

WARNER: When I read it, I thought, this is good, this is sincere. And then I read the analysis online. People have actually highlighted and underlined the parts they thought worked and did not. And that's when I started to think maybe this is not a very good apology. Maybe it's kind of a bad one.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "LATE NIGHT WITH SETH MEYERS")

SETH MEYERS: You just punched me in the face.

AMBER RUFFIN: I'm sorry that your face feels punched.

(LAUGHTER)

MEYERS: That's not an apology.

WARNER: So is a sorry about finding the right combination of words? Well, then the English language is remarkably unhelpful.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: My apology speaks for itself.

WARNER: We have this one, all-purpose word...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: Sorry.

WARNER: ...Equally at home when a stranger bumps you on the subway...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #3: Sorry.

WARNER: ...As it is on national television...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BILL CLINTON: What I want the American people to know...

WARNER: ...By a U.S. president.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

CLINTON: ...What I want the Congress to know...

WARNER: ...In his darkest hour.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

CLINTON: ...Is that I am profoundly sorry for all I have done wrong in words and deeds.

WARNER: Compare this, say, to a language like Japanese. If you Google how to say sorry in Japanese...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: In Japanese, we have so many way of saying I'm sorry.

WARNER: ...You're going to find dozens of YouTube videos explaining this kind of complex vocabulary of apology.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: So I'm going to teach you guys all that today.

WARNER: From the sorry to a friend...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: ...To the sorry to your mom.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: Sorry to a customer.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: Or...

WARNER: Or...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: Your teacher or your boss.

WARNER: Sorry our company overstated a billion dollars in profit.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: And this is really a polite way.

WARNER: And so on...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: ...And so on...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: Up this kind of ladder of apologies.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: (Speaking Japanese). Oh, my God. It's so long.

WARNER: And then there are different levels of bows. You can bend more deeply or hold it for longer. And in this way, you can dial up or down the degree of responsibility and weight and seriousness and shame. And yet when it comes to big, public expressions of contrition, the Japanese have fared no better than their American counterparts.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: I'm Gregory Warner, and this is ROUGH TRANSLATION. We look at how a conversation we're having in the United States is playing out in some other corner of the world. Today we're going to take you behind the scenes on a sorry that was so delicate, it ended up needing its own apology broker. She had to translate one apology culture to another and, along the way, work out some pretty basic things about what a sorry is, who it's for and what makes it click.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

JAMES T. MURPHY: You found us.

WARNER: Great to see you.

MURPHY: Come on in, please.

WARNER: Our story really begins with this guy.

MURPHY: My name is James T. Murphy.

WARNER: Ninety-seven years old...

MURPHY: M-U-R-P-H-Y.

WARNER: ...Born in 1920 in Livingston, Texas.

MURPHY: I don't know if I was a very good Tex...

WARNER: At 18, he enlists in the Army Air Corps, gets sent to the Philippines.

MURPHY: I couldn't wait to get a map where it says unexplored territory, get two or three people, we're going to explore this. And we would.

WARNER: But just before his two-year stint is over...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #2: The Japanese have attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

WARNER: And the next day...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #3: Manila has just been bombed. In fact, right now it is being bombed.

WARNER: It attacks Jim's base.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #3: ...And without warning.

WARNER: Their supply lines are cut off. There's four months of desperate, heavy fighting.

MURPHY: The food was gone. The ammunition was gone. We had no fight left in us. we were worn out, completely exhausted when we were overrun by the Japanese and captured.

WARNER: Seventy-six thousand troops. It's the largest Army under American command to ever surrender. They're marched across the peninsula of Bataan.

MURPHY: Bataan Death March.

WARNER: The Bataan Death March.

MURPHY: It was almost beyond description. We were continuously beaten, shot and killed.

WARNER: Of those who actually make it to the prisoner of war camp, even more will die of disease and starvation.

MURPHY: Our biggest job was to bury the dead. We wondered how - what we'd have to do to survive. But old Murph here (laughter) - he wasn't about to give about.

WARNER: Murphy makes a vow to himself.

MURPHY: I don't know how logical I was, but I made rules that I would go by to try to survive.

WARNER: One rule - he's not going to bow to the Japanese guards.

MURPHY: I said, I would bow to no man.

WARNER: Even when they beat him for not bowing...

MURPHY: Sometimes I had to make out like I was bowing.

WARNER: He tells himself that wasn't a real bow.

MURPHY: Little quickie (laughter).

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: He also vows to do nothing to help the Japanese war effort. But two years into his capture, he's loaded onto a cargo ship, sent to mainland Japan to the snowy mountains of the North. And he's brought with 500 other prisoners to an old copper mine, and he's handed a pick

MURPHY: You work, or you die.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: When Jim gets too sick to walk the 2 miles from the camp to the mine entrance, two other starving POWs are ordered to drag him there.

MURPHY: Yes, I was carried up the mountain several times. One man on each side. And by the time the three of you got up there, you had three workers who couldn't get up.

WARNER: I just can't understand that. Why would they want a sick worker who couldn't even walk in a mine?

MURPHY: Well, people that we were able to communicate with indicated that there was contract to furnish so many able-bodied people to the mine each day.

WARNER: In this contract, it's between the Japanese military and the company Mitsubishi. That's who owns this mine. Jim realizes he's been sold as labor to the Mitsubishi Corporation. For 11 months and seven days, he mines the copper that he knows will go to make Japanese bullets and submarines. Until...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #5: It's official.

WARNER: ...The war ends. He's liberated, and Jim returns home to an America that is celebrating.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #5: Vast throngs of happy people celebrate the end of fighting, the dawn of peace.

MURPHY: A lot of stuff I haven't talked much about, and you probably detect that.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #5: It's all over. It's total victory.

MURPHY: I put so much stuff way in - back of my mind.

WARNER: Jim did not want to talk about what he went through with anybody. He didn't even want to brief the military about his experiences. That's how badly he wanted to put this chapter behind him.

MURPHY: I don't mean to be light on any of this stuff. The reason - I smile sometime. But if I don't smile, I'll cry (laughter).

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: Jim's age has been called the silent generation - the generation that bucks up and doesn't talk about their feelings. Back then, neither side - not Japan and not America - wanted to talk about the bad things that were done in the war. And not until decades past did something happen that would give this whole culture of silence around the war a kind of jolt.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #6: The president of the United States...

WARNER: It's 1988, and President Ronald Reagan takes the stage with about a dozen Japanese-Americans.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

RONALD REAGAN: Members of the Congress and the distinguished guests, my fellow Americans, we gather here today to write a grave wrong.

WARNER: He acknowledges the 120,000 Japanese-Americans who were rounded up from their homes at the start of the war.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

REAGAN: This action was taken without trial, without jury. It was based solely on race.

WARNER: Reagan's apology is a huge success in America with the victims. And more than that, it becomes a catalyst for other apologies - a kind of template for how you say sorry for crimes in World War II.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BRIAN MULRONEY: I speak for members on all sides of the House today...

WARNER: In Canada six weeks later...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MULRONEY: ...In offering to Japanese-Canadians the formal and sincere apology...

WARNER: In Germany...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED POLITICIAN: (Speaking German).

WARNER: ...The government apologizes.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED POLITICIAN: (Speaking German).

WARNER: German corporations pay into a $6 billion fund to compensate people they forced to labor in their factories.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #7: The 12 firms paying into the fund include Volkswagen, DaimlerChrysler...

WARNER: Jim Murphy is at home watching TV, seeing German companies apologizing for exactly what was done to him.

MURPHY: I really felt that a wrong had been done to me.

WARNER: And he's realizing how much he wants to hear those words.

MURPHY: I wanted someone to say, you know, sorry and that you won't do it again or something like that...

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MURPHY: ...To set aside those experiences.

WARNER: Jim had tried to move on, set those memories aside, but they kept coming back.

MURPHY: Post-traumatic and all that.

WARNER: He'd have nightmares.

MURPHY: Can't sleep at night (laughter).

WARNER: And he thought if only he could hear those words, I'm sorry, then the past could stay past.

MURPHY: I think it would have to be perfectly honest.

WARNER: And it wasn't just Jim who felt this way.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #8: On the march - on the death march...

WARNER: Nearly all of the American POWs who came home alive from Japan had stories.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #9: So second week, I think I weighed 80 pounds when we got up there.

WARNER: Each year, they'd share their stories at an annual POW convention.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #10: I saw men dying at hundreds a day.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #11: No, we couldn't run. We could hardly walk.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #12: And if you didn't, they were there with the bayonet. You know, they'd poke you.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #13: Those are facts. It ain't no myth.

WARNER: So especially after Ronald Reagan opened the floodgates of World War II apologies, they were writing op-eds and joining boycott campaigns to try to get Japan to say sorry, too.

MURPHY: They owed us an apology.

WARNER: Every year, the POWs would meet, call for an apology. But from Japan, there was only silence.

MURPHY: They refused to admit publicly what they had done to us - to American forces.

WARNER: Finally, in 2009, the POWs decide they're just going to hold one last convention in San Antonio. At this point, many members have died. There are more wheelchairs and oxygen masks. They don't want to dwindle away like that, so they make this all-out push for any Japanese official to show up.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: And the day before the meeting, they get a phone call. The Japanese ambassador is on a plane to Texas. He's going to speak to the POWs.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #15: It is clearly my privilege - his honor Ichiro Fujisaki.

(APPLAUSE)

WARNER: All right. Just to set the scene here - so this is all taking place in a hotel ballroom. You got this big, long banquet table. The ambassador stands behind it at one of those squat, little podiums.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: The room is actually crammed with reporters, and in the front row are all the POWs with their uniforms and their medals.

MURPHY: Yeah, I was at that meeting.

WARNER: Jim's eyes are on the ambassador who starts his speech.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ICHIRO FUJISAKI: We extend a heartfelt apology for our country having caused tremendous damage and suffering to many people, including prisoners of wars.

WARNER: To many people including prisoners of wars, even though it's really only the POWs who are here listening to him.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ICHIRO: To all those who have lost their lives in the war...

WARNER: Wait, so now he is sorry for everyone who died in the war.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ICHIRO: ...And after the war and their family members.

WARNER: And with each phrase, it's like he's inviting more and more victims into the room, until - by the end - it's not clear who this apology is actually for or why.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ICHIRO: Sufferings of many people, including prisoners of war, should not be repeated.

WARNER: When the ambassador finishes talking, half the POW's applaud.

MURPHY: Yeah.

WARNER: And half of them turned their backs.

MURPHY: Turned their backs and walked out.

WARNER: Which one were you?

MURPHY: I don't think I applauded. I stood up in deference to his rank.

WARNER: You didn't really - weren't really sure whether to believe him.

MURPHY: You know, you hear, I apologize, I apologize, I apologize. You really don't know which one (laughter) you're going to believe. You had to think a long time.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: The POWs would never convene again, and many were ready to call it quits on this whole apology campaign. Jim Murphy wondered if any sorry could do what he hoped - if what had gone so wrong in that hotel ballroom could ever go right. But over the years that the POWs had been fighting for a sorry from Japan, they had acquired an unlikely ally.

KINUE TOKUDOME: This is the very special friends.

WARNER: A Japanese woman named Kinue Tokudome - living in California, she had befriended some POWs.

KINUE: This is Bob.

WARNER: One POW even asked her to write his obituary.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

KINUE: Can you believe the Bataan Death March survivor asked the Japanese person to write his own obituary? And I did that.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: Kinue was born in Japan just after the war. As a teenager in the 1960s, no one talked about the POWs or the war. Her high school history textbooks - they stopped at 1930.

KINUE: That's how I remember. And...

WARNER: How did you feel about that silence at the time?

KINUE: I didn't even recognize the silence or anything. You know, when you're, like, a teenager, you don't care about what my father did during the war.

WARNER: Then she gets married.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: At 26, she follows her husband to America.

KINUE: Just a housewife.

WARNER: She uses this phrase a lot to describe herself. We should add that she is a housewife who also taught herself English and put herself through college and a year of law school while raising two kids. And as the years passed, and she looked at Japan with some more distance, that silence she'd grown up with - it started to feel ugly.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

KINUE: Maybe you don't know, but - at the time - there was a strange phenomenon in Japan. Anti-Semitic books were the best-seller.

WARNER: Japan was not only denying its own atrocities but now Germany's as well.

KINUE: Not a fringe publication but the major publication also ran articles like the Holocaust never happened, and I was kind of upset. So I decided to write a book.

WARNER: When Kinue says that she was kind of upset so she decided to write a book, what she means is that she spent the next year crisscrossing the country, on her own dime, to interview Holocaust survivors and translate their words into Japanese. And that book started her writing other magazine articles, which is how she happens to hear for the first time the story of the POWs in Japan. She tells me about her very first time meeting a POW. His name was Lester Tenney. She sat on his back porch in San Diego. His wife brought them lemonade. She wondered how he would react to this visit from a Japanese freelance journalist.

KINUE: Lester always told me when I first met, oh, by the way, Kinue, I already forgave all the Japanese people because not forgiving them is only making me unhappy person. Forgiving them is a gift that he gave to himself.

WARNER: Kinue had grown up in this silence around the war as if silence protected Japan from a great shame. When Mitsubishi was sued for its treatment of POWs, lawyers for the company stood up in Japanese court and said that just to admit the history of forced labor

would be to saddle Japan with a, quote, "mistaken burden of the soul for hundreds of years." Here in California, on Lester's back porch, Kinue felt so far away from all that. She felt like the POWs were ready to forgive if only the Japanese would be willing to talk about what happened.

KINUE: The chance for apology is the gift that these POWs could give the Japanese people. Where is the shame? No. If there is any culture or language gap that I really want to, you know, bridge, it's this.

WARNER: The sorry that Lester wanted to hear was not a sorry soaked in shame. It was more about talking it out and helping both sides move on.

KINUE: So I often said, to some of my friends in Japan, what I'm doing is helping these POWs help Japanese and company feel good about themselves finally.

WARNER: Lester and the other POWs wanted it to feel these good sorry vibes not just from the official corners of the Japanese government but also from the Japanese companies that had actually forced them to labor. So in 2014, Kinue was sitting in front of her laptop, thinking, how is she going to get this conversation started? And something pretty ordinary led to something remarkable. The ordinary thing is that Kinue's ancient laptop finally died. She bought a new one. And when she booted it up and looked at the new screen, she found herself typing a letter.

KINUE: This is the moment that I really, really want to make a difference - only one person, a housewife.

WARNER: She writes directly to 14 Japanese companies that had used POW labor in their mines, and their shipyards and their chemical plants. She doesn't tell them that she is trying to cross a cultural language gap. She doesn't explicitly say that she's trying to move an apology away from shame and toward forgiveness and good feeling. Instead, she writes, we cannot erase the past, but we can face it honestly and try to deepen further the friendship that American and Japanese people have successfully built by learning together even a painful chapter of our shared history. And she mails this off. And she gets a phone call.

KINUE: The telephone call I received is...

WARNER: From Mitsubishi materials.

KINUE: We would like to discuss the apology issue if you would be kind enough to come visit us.

WARNER: That apology that the POWs have been asking for for 70 years, they want to discuss it - the same company that once said in court that admitting forced labor would saddle Japan with a centuries-long burden of soul. After the break - their unusual proposal.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: I'm Gregory Warner. We're back with ROUGH TRANSLATION. When Kinue gets that phone call from Mitsubishi, she takes the high-speed rail down to Tokyo and finds herself in a conference room with three men.

KINUE: All men.

WARNER: All men? Are they dressed in suits?

KINUE: Of course, of course.

WARNER: Are you dressed in a suit?

KINUE: Not too formal but at least decent-looking.

WARNER: One of the suits closes the door. They all sit down.

KINUE: There's three gentlemen. They want to make sure that if they were to issue an apology, it will be accepted.

WARNER: So how did that work? They said...

KINUE: Well, of course, in a very polite Japanese way - asking me, do you think the POW will accept if our company apologize?

WARNER: Kinue listened to this. And she's trying to digest what exactly they're telling her because if you are someone who's ever said sorry or had sorry said to you, you know that the way it works is that first the apologizer speaks, and then the other one accepts it - or doesn't accept it. That's their choice. What Mitsubishi is asking for is that the acceptance be guaranteed, in advance, before an apology is even drafted. It feels less like contrition, more like a contract - like having your mortgage preapproved. Now, there was a reason that the men in suits were so gun-shy about committing to this apology. Japan had been burned before.

JANE YAMAZAKI: They have made apologies over and over and over again, and those apologies don't work very well.

WARNER: This is Professor Yamazaki.

YAMAZAKI: Jane Yamazaki.

WARNER: She's retired now, but she wrote a whole book about Japan's failed apologies for World War II crimes.

YAMAZAKI: You know, there's always something wrong with it.

WARNER: Have they had this experience more than once or twice?

YAMAZAKI: Every time.

WARNER: Oh, my God.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

YAMAZAKI: That's why they keep making these apologies over and over again. They're never enough.

WARNER: Japan actually had apologized for its actions in World War II. And if you remember those YouTube videos on how to say sorry...

(SOUNDBITE OF YOUTUBE VIDEO)

UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: ...That whole taxonomy of responsibility and shame, that had only made things worse.

YAMAZAKI: Yes. In the early Japanese apologies, the word that was used was usually ikan or makoto ni ikan - true regret. I regret truly.

WARNER: True regret, that was seen as way too bureaucratic - too neutral. That was ditched and replaced with...

YAMAZAKI: Hansei. It means to reflect on and sort of to criticize. So when this word hansei was used, people they said, ah, they're just - they're going to reflect on their wrongs. But in Japan, whenever you do something wrong as a child, you know, you're told very seriously reflect on your actions. It doesn't just mean think about it. It means take it to heart.

WARNER: And so these apologies tried to clarify that this was really...

YAMAZAKI: From the heart.

WARNER: ...From the heart.

YAMAZAKI: My deepest heart.

WARNER: This also got Japan in trouble. In 1990, the emperor of Japan had drafted several versions of an apology to the Koreans.

YAMAZAKI: One of these versions, it had him saying an expression that sort of means, I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart. The Korean newspapers had a cartoon where they showed Mount Fuji. And these notes were coming out of Mount Fuji - like singing notes.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG)

UNIDENTIFIED SINGER: (Singing in Korean).

YAMAZAKI: They said that's just Emperor Akihito practicing his apology. Those words sounded like, oh, my heart is aching - is the way these words were coming out.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG)

UNIDENTIFIED SINGER: (Singing in Korean).

WARNER: In Japan, each of these rejected sorries provoked anger and frustration. There were calls for a moratorium on World War II apologies - no more sorries. So you can see why when Mitsubishi received Kinue's gracious request for a heartfelt apology, its board members had to think twice.

YUKIO OKAMOTO: Hello, Gregory.

WARNER: One of those board members was...

YUKIO: Yukio Okamoto.

WARNER: I've heard people call him the Henry Kissinger of Japan - only younger. He's 72. He's a guy who has the ear of prime ministers. He's a regular commentator on TV.

YUKIO: We were not sure...

WARNER: And he wondered.

YUKIO: ...If the American victims will really accept our apology - emotionally and sincerely or not.

WARNER: Could this apology be any different?

YUKIO: Otherwise, we will have to be met with further criticism. So, of course, our Japanese company is being conservative - was a bit hesitant.

WARNER: If one company apologizes, and it does not go well, then all the companies could look bad.

YUKIO: You know, Japanese society - and especially the business community - is like a gigantic fleet. Individual ship cannot make individual turns freely.

WARNER: So the only way it seemed to him that Mitsubishi could take this risk is if they had that guarantee that the apology would be accepted.

KINUE: I let them know I happened to know the one available POW who were forced to work at the Mitsubishi mines...

MURPHY: James T. Murphy.

KINUE: ...So he should be the one to accept it.

MURPHY: M-U-R-P-H-Y.

KINUE: And the company, Mitsubishi Materials, said, so Mr. Murphy will accept it, right?

WARNER: Kinue doesn't tell Mitsubishi that Jim will accept it, but she does tell them, don't worry. Jim Murphy's a very forgiving person.

KINUE: He's such a gentleman. And he never instilled any bitter feeling in their children.

WARNER: Why is it important that he didn't instill bitterness in his children, for Mitsubishi to hear that?

KINUE: I think that would assure them that they are dealing with a very decent human being.

YUKIO: Ms. Tokudome was instrumental. She really did a good job in persuading us that our goodwill will be met with the equal amount of goodwill by the American side.

WARNER: Kinue was right about one thing - Jim is a forgiving person.

MURPHY: 'Cause I really believe that you could get eaten up. I've seen people, like, eaten up with hatred.

WARNER: When she wrote him, he wrote her right back saying what he required in an apology, which was everything he did not hear from the ambassador.

KINUE: He sent me email - very helpful. Well, I can accept the apology if it includes three thing.

MURPHY: I did it. I'm sorry I did it. I will not do it again. What else can you say?

WARNER: But what Kinue did not know is that Jim's own reasons for wanting an apology had shifted. If in the beginning he'd wanted to hear an apology so he could put the past behind him, set those hard memories aside. Now he was in his ninth decade.

MURPHY: I'm sorry because closure means so much to somebody, but I don't want closure (laughter).

WARNER: What he mostly felt now was the weight - the weight of being the last POW who had worked in the Mitsubishi mines, who was alive and well enough to travel, the last POW who could legitimately accept an apology.

What were you worried that the apology was...

MURPHY: I was worried that the apology would not satisfy all the people I was representing.

WARNER: And you knew that some of the POWs who died would never have accepted it.

MURPHY: Yes. Yes.

WARNER: Did that trouble you?

MURPHY: It did. It did.

WARNER: Both sides were taking a risk going forward with this apology. If Mitsubishi hit the wrong note, there could be blowback.

KINUE: So they really want assurance from me.

WARNER: But Jim felt his burden, his duty to the dead, not to accept an apology sight unseen.

KINUE: He said something to the effect, I would consider that apology statement. And that was not good enough for the Mitsubishi.

WARNER: Kinue is going back and forth between these two men...

KINUE: It's kind of...

WARNER: ...Like some kind of apology broker.

KINUE: ...Which-comes-first kind of a situation.

WARNER: She finally gets Mitsubishi's apology in writing, but...

KINUE: In Japanese.

WARNER: ...It's in Japanese. And there's a big warning on this email - for internal company use only. Kinue thinks, well...

KINUE: I can translate the two page...

WARNER: She could translate it...

KINUE: ...Of course.

WARNER: ...And send it to Jim.

KINUE: A couple of hours, I could do that. But I didn't want to do that because I really didn't want to create the situation that what Jim read with my translation somehow different from the actual version.

WARNER: She doesn't want to send Jim something now to get a yes that he might later regret. So she tells him, look; I have read this apology. It's good. It's what you want.

KINUE: I thought, this is perfect, very sincere. This will be accepted by Jim. But Jim being Jim, he had to read entire statement in English.

WARNER: It's 10 days before the apology ceremony's supposed to happen in Los Angeles, not far from Jim's home. And Mitsubishi still does not have their guarantee.

KINUE: I was frustrated.

WARNER: She writes this anguished email at 6:30 in the morning to Jim's son...

KINUE: It was happening just a few days times by...

WARNER: ...Tries to pressure him, blaming Jim for not trusting her.

KINUE: But looking back, I regret. I shouldn't have take that position.

WARNER: Jim never sees that angry email. His son never shows it to him because Jim has already had a change of heart.

MURPHY: I thought we had this one chance.

WARNER: He writes Kinue that he feels it his duty to see this through...

KINUE: Even before reading the English translation.

WARNER: ...To be there at the apology ceremony.

MURPHY: I often don't feel well enough to travel. But I said, I will be there that Sunday no matter what.

WARNER: The way Jim saw it, Kinue had just worked so hard for this to happen, and he didn't want to be the guy who stood in the way of history. And so that Sunday morning, Jim gets dressed in his gray suit and red tie. He gets in his son's car with his wife, Nancy. In his pocket are two sheets of paper typed with some carefully unsentimental sentences. One of them reads that this apology meets all the criteria necessary to satisfy the elements of an acceptable apology. It's like he's defending his decision to show up.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: Jim and his family arrive at the Museum of Tolerance at the Simon Wiesenthal Center. They've agreed to host this ceremony. He walks into this giant lobby with a spiral ramp up like the Guggenheim. And all these reporters are milling around. This is a huge deal. But instead of going into the room with all the reporters, he led down this little hallway to an elevator bank, taken up to the fourth floor to a private room. Jim wasn't expecting any of this. Inside the room, he finds another POW he knows, Lester Tenney, also some family members of POWs. There are the Mitsubishi executives, including Yukio Okamoto. But what Jim does not see are any reporters.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

HIKARI KIMURA: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: We only have tape of this because the daughter of a POW had a camera rolling.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

KIMURA: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: First, a Mitsubishi senior executive, Hikari Kimura, stands up to speak.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

KIMURA: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: And he talks about James Murphy, the other POWs, what they suffered.

MURPHY: What they admitted.

WARNER: Jim is listening to these words through an interpreter. He's hearing all the details of what they went through.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

KIMURA: (Speaking Japanese).

MURPHY: Without sufficient food, water, medical treatment, sanitation.

WARNER: It's so wonderfully specific.

MURPHY: And the harsh life in the mines. What else could I say, you know?

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

KIMURA: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: The Mitsubishi executive says, "when I understand the sad truth of the matter, I feel a pained sense of ethical responsibility as a fellow human being. As a representative of Mitsubishi Materials, I apologize to you deeply."

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

KIMURA: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: And then Jim watches as all seven Mitsubishi executives in the room together stand up and bow at the waist. The bow lasts 14 seconds.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MURPHY: They went through the most pronounced gyrations of offering an apology that I've ever seen. They were almost crawling up on the table. And they said that it was the top way of performing the very highest level of performing an apology. Have you heard of that?

WARNER: I just know that each one has more and more shame associated with it.

MURPHY: Yeah. The top wasn't too much for me (laughter).

WARNER: Yeah, you deserved it.

MURPHY: To me, it may seem more sincere. They were almost embarrassing. I wasn't expecting so much feeling to be put into it.

WARNER: Was the Mitsubishi one the first time you really were sure this is a sincere apology?

MURPHY: Yes, it was.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: This was not only the first-ever apology by a Japanese company to an American POW. More than that, it was also one of Japan's least controversial apologies for any World War II crime, a model for how Japan might say sorry once and well and not have to repeat themselves. And so the weird thing about this apology was how few people got to see it. The tape you just heard has never been aired. There were no reporters allowed in the room. Every news report about this apology - and it made headlines around the world - begins after this apology has actually happened. You see Jim and the Mitsubishi executives posing together, shaking hands. There are speeches.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #16: (Speaking Japanese).

WARNER: When it's Jim's turn to speak, he veers off script. He does not say those dutiful sentences that this satisfies the criteria of a proper apology.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MURPHY: It's a real pleasure to have so many turn out for this event. This happened to be the first time that we've heard those words, and they really touch you at the heart. So it's my high honor to accept the apology from the Japanese delegation.

WARNER: Jim looks out at the crowd, and he makes a kind of wish for the future.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MURPHY: We hope to extend Mitsubishi's gracious coming forward at this time.

WARNER: He hopes, he says, that other Japanese companies will follow Mitsubishi's example.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MURPHY: All the other mines and factories who employed American POWs against their will.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: Kinue would write letters to those other companies. She would tell them look at this apology that Mitsubishi made. Look how well it went.

KINUE: Six month, one year - I was hopeful maybe some other major one would come forward.

WARNER: Maybe another company would apologize and another and another. She knew that Japanese companies often move as a fleet.

KINUE: But it didn't happen. So I decided, well, that's it. They have to live with the legacy of not coming forward.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: We want these two different things from a public apology. We want it to spark a public conversation...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

REAGAN: We gather here today to right a grave wrong.

WARNER: ...To get us all talking about something that we're not talking enough about. But we also want it to feel like a real apology, intimate and heartfelt and sincere. Yukio Okamoto told me that in order to make that apology feel sincere, they had to be in that side room in LA away from the press.

YUKIO: For instance, can we shed our tears to TV cameras? I mean, that's a bit of an artificial thing, don't you think? We wanted to be free individuals.

WARNER: Mitsubishi never released any official text of this apology in Japanese, only in English. The company told me it did not want to fuel blowback from Japanese critics, and Kinue agreed. She said she wanted to keep the focus on the POWs, not to muddy this moment with a lot of Japanese politics. But without all that blowback and shrill debate, this apology did not start a cascade of other apologies. It was a one-off, and it kind of gets to a basic conundrum about public apologies, whether you're talking about a copper mine in 1944 or a comedian's hotel room in 2004. Who are these public expressions of sorry actually for? Are they mostly for the people who were harmed, for their closure, their peace of mind? Or are they in some way for the rest of us? I asked Jim...

Did you want the apology in a sense because you needed to hear it, or did you want the apology because Japan needed to hear it?

MURPHY: I could live without it, but I wanted to accept it. And this might boggle your mind because I wanted to start a better world for people. I know that's hard to believe, but that's what I really feel, that the world would feel better for everyone to apologize. We can try. We can keep trying.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: Today's show was produced by Jess Jiang and edited and scored by Marianne McCune; music by John Ellis. Thanks to Jan Thompson for letting us use footage from that private apology ceremony. Her documentary about the POW experience is called "Never The

Same." Archival interviews of the POWs by Kinue Tokudome and the voices you heard were Robert Brown, Carlos Montoya, Abie Abraham, Lester Tenney and Hap Halloran.

I first learned about this story from Pernille Rudlin. She blogs at rudlinconsulting.com. And all of those links are on our Facebook page, @roughtranslation. We had a lot of help with this episode. Thanks to ***William Underwood****, Jeffrey Helmreich, Aio Ogata (ph), Elise Hu and Dan Charles. Translations by Aiko Masubuchi (ph) and editorial feedback from Karen Duffin, Masato Hasegawa (ph), Kenny Malone, Nick Fountain, Robert Smith, Robert Krulwich, Sana Krasikov, Stuart Symington, Soren Wheeler and Sally Helm. The ROUGH TRANSLATION advisory team is Anya Grundmann, Mathilde Piard and Neal Carruth; fact-checking by Sarah Knight, mastering by Natasha Branch and Andy Huether.*

Pitch us your ROUGH TRANSLATION story at roughtranslation@npr.org, and tell us what you think of the show. Rate us on Apple podcasts, or tell a friend. It really does help spread the word. We're on Twitter @Roughly. Finally, a special thank you to Jim Murphy's son, Ken Murphy, who convinced his dad to talk to us about memories that he'd rather set aside.

MURPHY: I've had a lot of interviews. I think you're going to be my last one (laughter). It does get a little difficult.

WARNER: Jim and Ken co-wrote a memoir called "When Men Must Live." They're working on a Mitsubishi chapter. I'm Gregory Warner, back next week with more ROUGH TRANSLATION.