

Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Minister's Award

A Visit to the National Sanatorium Oshimaseishoen

Rina Sasaki, Ninth Grade (third year of three grades)
Kamiyama Junior High School, Kamiyama Town, Tokushima Prefecture

What springs to mind when you hear the word “discrimination”? I came to understand the truly frightful nature of “discrimination” through my study of human rights and Hansen’s disease.

Hansen’s disease has low infectious capacity and therefore is not easily transmitted from person to person. Despite this, people with this disease were stripped of their freedoms and rights due to prejudice and discrimination that came from people’s mistaken beliefs. I was shocked to learn that “discrimination” is born—and that the resulting suffering is born—from the thinking and individual judgments of people with authority.

We recently visited the Oshimaseishoen, a place to which people with Hansen’s disease were forcibly sent to isolate them from the public. It is situated on an island, and the only way to reach it is by boat, something that I felt illustrated the reality of discrimination.

First, we participated in an exchange gathering with members of the local prefectural association of persons affected by Hansen’s disease. There, we heard residents who had recovered from the disease talk about what they actually experienced and felt amid severe discrimination. One thing that stuck with me was a casual remark by one of the speakers: “I remembered fondly my quarrels with my siblings.” People with Hansen’s disease are forcibly isolated at a sanatorium. In other words, they are forced to live apart from their families. They cannot share laughter with their families, nor can they enjoy meals sitting around the table with them. This situation continued forever even after they are cured of the disease. I wonder what goes through the minds of these residents as they live their lives each day. Just imagining their feelings caused my heart to ache.

During our tour of the sanatorium, we visited a place called a “charnel house.” Lined up inside the charnel house were the urns containing ashes of people with Hansen’s disease who had come to the island and died, but yet could still not return to their hometowns. Some of the urns bore no name. Keeping urns anonymous is an act of compassion intended to ensure that the owners’ families are not exposed to discrimination from people who might see them. My soul was shaken by the kindness of the residents, as they always consider their families, even when they are robbed of precious time, even as they face death. I realized that the words “pain” and “sadness” cannot sufficiently describe what discrimination is.

When I closed my eyes on the bus home, I could see the smiling faces of the persons affected by this disease as they looked us in the eye and intently told their stories. But something was bothering me. I understood that the discrimination they suffered came from mistaken beliefs, but couldn’t a solution have been found earlier? And what can we do to return the smiles they so kindly gave us?

That night, I spoke to my family about my visit to the Oshimaseishoen. Neither my father nor my mother knew much about Hansen’s disease. With the sanatorium’s pamphlet in my hand, I spoke intently about what I had learned. I spoke about forced isolation, about abortions of babies when mothers became pregnant in the sanatorium, and about how the ashes of residents who died could not be returned to their families. I could not control the anger inside me. Surprised at my attitude, my parents said, “We didn’t know such unhappiness existed so near us. People of our parents’ generation probably did not know either. There are many human rights problems in society, and the first thing we can do is learn the truth about them. What you told us was very informative.”

That’s it! I wanted to tell someone! I had a burning need to tell someone about the sadness and anger I felt at the Oshimaseishoen, and about the strength and kindness of the people I met there. The residents, who had spent most of their lives on the island, spoke very animatedly to us but seemed to have difficulty even walking. As they are growing older, it is our mission to tell others of the pain in their hearts. I was happy to be able to discuss with my parents the discrimination that people with Hansen’s disease live with. Perhaps I am just feeling a little self-satisfied, but I think I’ve taken my first step. From now on, whenever I encounter a human rights problem, I want to think about it seriously and then act with proper judgment. For those of us who visited the

island, I believe this is our responsibility and, moreover, the only way we can fulfill the wishes of the island's residents, who have suffered hardship for so long.