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Takamitsu MURAOKA (76)

Leiden University emeritus professor about Japan's war guilt

His image of Holland used to be a country famed for its tulips and windmills and with friendly relationships with Japan.

In 1991, on arrival in the country as a Leiden University professor, he was confronted with a totally different reality. Some of his future colleagues stood aloof. It turned out that the flowers laid by the visiting premier of Japan, Kaifu, in commemoration of Dutch victims in the present day Indonesia had been thrown into a nearby pond. He learned that many former POWs and ordinary citizens returned from their former colony in the Far East had suffered dreadfully at the hands of Japanese militaries in Indonesia. There were also groups demanding compensation. There was quite a bit of anti-Japanese sentiments.

After reading quite a few books and documents on these issues he helped to launch in 2010 a Dutch-Japanese dialogue. Dutch returnees from Indonesia and Japanese residents in the country got together to talk about the hardships in internment camps and the construction of the Thai-Burma Railway and other related subjects in order to gain a better understanding of that period of the shared history.

Prof. Muraoka grew up in Kagoshima. Wanting to study English, his favourite subject, he entered Tokyo Kyoiku University, then went on to study in Jerusalem. Having become a specialist in Hebrew, he moved then to England, Australia, and finally to Holland.

He left Japan half a century ago, but he retains Japanese nationality. "I am determined to remain Japanese until Japan decides squarely to face its recent history and guilt, and act on that recognition honestly and sincerely," he says.

Since 2003 when he retired, he has been spending a minimum of five weeks every year, teaching his chosen subjects as a volunteer in universities and theological schools in countries of Asia colonised, invaded or occupied by Japan.

"Through involvement in the Dutch-Japanese dialogue I have learned that my sense of remorse needs to be translated into some actions, not just verbal apologies." Next year, 70 years after Japan's defeat, he wishes to have memoirs of his teaching ministry in Asia published in both English and Japanese.

(by Maki Ohkubo, also photo)