



A sword that transcends the sea and time  
A story that connects Uwajima and France

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Born in Tobe Town in 1979. Joined in 2004. After working at the Yawatahama branch office and the Bancho press club, I have been in my current position since 2009. After the nuclear accident, I witnessed many phases from the shutdown of Shikoku Electric Power's Ikata Nuclear Power Station to the restart of Unit 3. I am deeply moved by the festivals and traditional events that continue throughout Nanyo. Evening drinks are returning to sake after a few laps.

In early December, at a facility for the elderly in Uwajima City, 98-year-old Yoshiko Utsunomiya gently touched a sword with her trembling hands. It was left behind by her husband, Masanori, who passed away about 20 years ago, and was requisitioned by the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ) at the end of the war. Michel Lavigne (64), who came to Japan from France, is watching Yoshiko with wet eyes. It was the moment when he finally fulfilled his desire to return the sword to his family after working hard since April.

This is the story of the sword that connected Uwajima and France.

## Letters on wooden plaques



The name and address were written on the wooden tag attached to the sword  
(provided by Mr. Lavigne)

Mr. Lavigne, who lives in Bon-Encontre in southwestern France, was flipping through catalogs at an auction to be held in late April when he spotted a Japanese sword.

There is an explanation that the sword was seized when Japan surrendered, and in the photo there is a wooden tag with letters written on the sheath of the sword.

**"To Masanori Utsunomiya, Jojoji Temple, Tanosuji Village, Higashiuwa District, Ehime Prefecture"**

He doesn't understand Japanese, but when he looked it up, he realized that it was his address and his name.

Mr. Lavigne was very interested in Japanese art, such as delicate handicrafts made by craftsmen. Since he understood that swords have an important meaning for Japanese people, he thought that Mr. Utsunomiya was asking for the return of his swords, and decided to search for his family.

He gathered information from the Internet and the Japanese embassy in France, obtained a list of exchange groups between Japan and France, and sent about 30 requests to find the owner. While there was little progress, Keiko Nakamura (67), a percussionist living in Strasbourg in the eastern part of France, responded to Mr. Lavigne's thoughts.

## Sudden development



Ms. Keiko Nakamura, living in France (provided by herself)

Ms. Nakamura also serves as the head of the European-Japanese Cultural Exchange Association in France, where she organizes cultural exchange events between Japan and France. At first, she expected it would take some time to find the owner, but when she contacted Eri Yamashita, a 45-year-old marimba player in Kochi City who is an acquaintance of hers, she consulted with her and said, "Speaking of which, I heard something like this..."

Ms. Yamashita, who learned of Mr. Lavigne's thoughts, responded, "If that is the case, I will definitely cooperate." On April 20th, when she received the call, the auction was approaching in 10 days, and she immediately started looking into the relevant parties.

Ms. Yamashita contacted the Ehime Prefectural Bereaved Family Association, the Prefectural Museum of History and Culture, Uwajima City, and other organizations that came to mind. From the old telephone directory, she called the Utsunomiya family name of the address on the wooden plaque in order from the top, and finally arrived at the birthplace of Mr. Masanori. Although she received information that his daughter lived in Uwajima City, she looked back with a wry smile, saying, "I was very suspicious".

## It's my father's handwriting



Eri Yamashita from Kochi City

One of the contacts Ms. Yamashita got was the Ehime Shimbun. When the Uwajima editorial department looked into past articles, there was an article about the death of Masanori Utsunomiya, who was the principal of Warei Elementary School in Uwajima City in 2003. Based on the information, she visited the address on April 22nd.

She explained the situation to the woman who served her, and when she showed her a picture of the sword, she said, "It's my father's handwriting." Masanori's second daughter, Junko, 68, looked surprised. His wife, Yoshiko, who lives in a facility for the elderly in the city, also confirmed the photo, confirming that it was Masanori's sword.



Mr. Lavigne immediately after winning the sword at auction (provided by himself)

The news that the family had been found was received with surprise and joy by Ms. Yamashita, Ms. Nakamura and Mr. Lavigne.

In order to return the sword to the Utsunomiya family, Mr. Lavigne tried to stop the organizer from putting the sword up for auction, but in vain, he decided to participate in the bidding.

He drove about 500 kilometers north of his home to Tours, where the auction site is located. The status of the auction was sent to Japan in real time, and Mr. Lavigne won the bid for approximately 6,000 euros (approximately 800,000 yen at the time), well above the minimum bid.

### **Widespread support**



People who cooperated in the search for the owner of the sword gathered together.

From the right, Ms. Yamashita, Ms. Nakamura, Mrs. Yoshiko, Mr. Lavigne, and Ms. Junko

Mr. Lavigne hoped to come to Japan as soon as possible and hand over the sword directly to his family, but the novel coronavirus epidemic prevented him from doing so.

During this time, he solicited donations on the Internet to raise funds for the sword. It was reported in French magazines, and he received offers from many people, including the exchange association with Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture, which is located in the neighboring town, and the chairman of the auction house "Drouot" in Paris.

Ms. Nakamura and Ms. Yamashita cooperated with the complicated procedures with the police and government regarding the transportation and possession of the sword. In May, Ms. Nakamura visited Uwajima City and met with Junko and others, deepening their friendship. With the easing of measures to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus around autumn, it was finally decided that Mr. Lavigne would come to Japan.

## To Yoshiko



Mr. Lavigne (left) and Mrs. Yoshiko holding hands in front of Masanori Utsunomiya's sword

On December 6, after Junko received permission to possess sword at the Uwajima police station, Mr. Lavigne headed to the elderly facility in the city where Yoshiko lived.

"I wanted to meet you," welcomed Yoshiko. When Mr. Lavigne opened the case containing the sword and "faced" the relics for the first time, she stared at it with an expression full of emotion. Prompted by Junko's call to "touch it," she gently placed her hand on the sword with a wooden tag bearing the handwriting of Masanori.



Yoshiko's eyes were watering when she met a sword for the first time.

Mr. Lavigne said of this moment, "I felt a strong emotion that I had never experienced before," and shared the joy of being able to hold hands with Yoshiko. As Ms. Nakamura, Ms. Yamashita and other people who cooperated in the search for the owner of the sword looked on, Yoshiko expressed her gratitude many times, saying, "Everyone acted as a bridge."

After leaving the facility, they also reported the return of the sword in front of Masanori's grave.

## Hospitality



Thanks to Junko's arrangement, Mr. Lavigne put on Masanori's kimono.

At a hair salon in the city, Junko arranged for Mr. Lavigne to put on Masanori's kimono. Junko, Nakamura, and others cheered at Michelle, who was dressed in a navy blue kimono, even though he said, "I think it's a little short." They went straight to Shikoku Sacred Place No. 42 Fudasho Butsumokuji Temple (Mima-cho, sunahachi) and experienced the tea ceremony in the precincts.

The schedule in Uwajima was very busy, and in addition to being welcomed by Mayor Fumiaki Okahara at the city hall, they toured tourist attractions such as Uwajima Castle, the feudal lord's garden Tenshaen, and a pearl farm. People who learned about Mr. Lavigne's thoughts from the media welcomed him wherever he went.



At Warei Elementary School, children gave him a necklace made of folded paper cranes.

At Warei Elementary School, where Masanori was last enrolled as principal, he toured the classrooms and the school's facilities. In the 6th grade class, a pamphlet introducing Japanese culture hand-made by the children for Mr. Lavigne was presented as a surprise gift.

There were illustrations and explanations on themes such as food and sports, and some were written in French using the translation function of the Internet. "Thank you for bringing the sword back to Uwajima," said one of the representative children, who also put on a necklace made of folded paper cranes.

On the morning of the 9th, when Mr. Lavigne left JR Uwajima Station after finishing his stay in Uwajima for 5 days and 4 nights, I asked him, "Did you have any good memories?" Mr. Lavigne spread out his hand wide and made a pose of "a lot!", and then smiled and said, "The bag I brought the sword in was full of souvenirs."

As Ms. Nakamura says, "For him, Uwajima is Japan," it seems that Uwajima has become a special place for Mr. Lavigne, who is visiting Japan for the first time.



## Father's thoughts



Masanori when he graduated from the Army Reserve Academy.  
His right hand holds a sword (provided by family)

December 4th, the day Mr. Lavigne left France for Japan, was Masanori's birthday. On the 8th, during his stay, it was 81 years since the attack on Pearl Harbor. The family had various thoughts about the return of Masanori's sword at this time.

According to Yoshiko and Junko, they had never heard of swords from Masanori during his lifetime.

Among the photographs kept by the family, there was a photograph of a young Masanori holding a sword. On the back, the date June 5, 1945 (Showa 20) and "Graduated from Kurume 1st Army Reserve Academy, Second Lieutenant (21 years old)" were written. Junko also checked the military register, but was unable to find detailed traces from graduation to the end of the war.



Mr. and Mrs. Utsunomiya, photographed at a photo studio in the city on New Year's Day 2000 (provided by family)

Masanori spent many years working with children as a teacher at elementary schools in Uwajima City and Ainan Town, and ended his career as the principal of Warei Elementary School.

In addition to serving as probation officer for about 20 years from 1983, after retiring as a prefectural cultural property protection instructor, he was involved in surveys of the Kagomori Castle ruins, a national historic site in Matsuno-cho, and has worked to improve the welfare and culture of the region. He died in 2003 at the age of 78.

Looking back, Yoshiko said, "He was a very perceptive person and took great care of children." He had a strong passion for education, and even after his retirement, students who admired him often gathered at his house, making it lively. Even now, students keep in contact with each other, such as contacting Yoshiko to ask how she is doing.

Masanori's sword is carefully kept by his family. Junko accepts, saying, "From now on, I think it's time to talk with my father." In the midst of the turbulent situation, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, she stared at the sword returned after 77 years and said, "I think my father wanted to convey that the essence of human hearts is love, which leads to peace, and that weapons cannot bring peace."