

Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea

AOBA-JAPAN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

Grade 7, Elio Esposito

November 15, 1977, was like any other ordinary school day for a thirteen-year-old girl named Megumi Yokota who lived in Niigata. Megumi walked home from school after her badminton practice but she didn't come home and was never heard from again.

As I consider myself a normal thirteen-year-old student living in Japan, I can't imagine the fear and pain that Megumi's family must have experienced. I wonder if Megumi herself could even comprehend what was happening to her and when she would learn that the strangers who abducted her were North Korean spies.

At the time, the former North Korean leader Kim Jong-il gave the green light for a program to abduct Japanese citizens. This decision resulted in seventeen Japanese citizens being abducted. The purpose of this program was to use Japanese abductees to assist the agents in the North Korean Reconnaissance General Bureau ("RGB") with Japanese language and culture so they could be more effective spies. They also stole the abductee's identity when they travelled abroad on missions.

Megumi was the first abductee taken in Japan by North Korea in 1977. In subsequent years another sixteen Japanese citizens were abducted plus an unknown number of people from various countries including South Korea, China, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Romania, France, Lebanon and Italy. My own family originated in Italy and Japan so was shocking to learn that abductees were taken

from both countries and could easily have been members of my family.

It was not until September 17, 2002, that the North Korean government admitted and apologized for thirteen abductions of Japanese citizens. The North Korean government made this announcement to normalize relations with the Japanese government. The North Koreans also acknowledged that only five abductees were still alive and would be returned. Unfortunately, Megumi was said to have died in 1994 however her family cannot accept this information without evidence. Many of the other families of abductees who were said to have died feel the same way as Megumi's family.

Since 2002, there hasn't been any significant progress regarding this North Korean abduction issue despite ongoing Japanese public interest. Despite the complexity of this issue, I still believe a solution is possible. Similar to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Japan and North Korea could arrange a similar commission for abductees and their families. Such talks should focus on the truth, not to blame or punish those responsible. Only through the truth will the victims and their families find some peace and closure.

In conclusion, these abductions are an unresolved but important issue for the Japanese people. Despite the political challenges, I believe the only solution involves disclosing the truth about what happened to each abductee. I hope one day the truth will be revealed including that of Megumi.