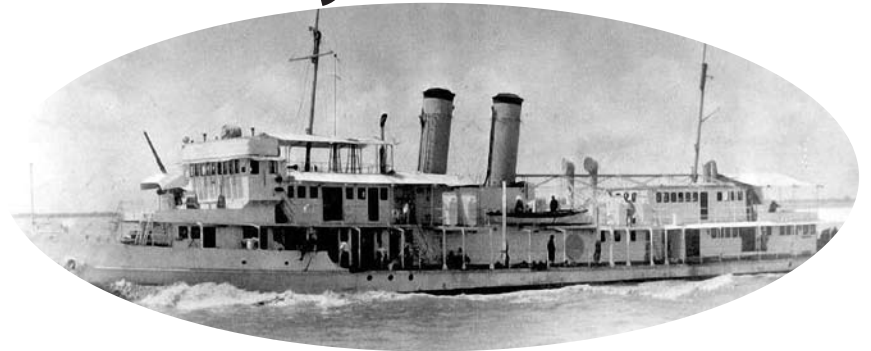


Letter from a Young Boy Following the *Panay* Incident

Trevor K. Plante and Lee Ann Potter



On December 22, 1937, a Japanese boy from the Shin Kozen Primary School delivered a letter and a ¥2.00 donation to the American consulate in Nagasaki, Japan. His letter, originally written in Japanese, was translated into English and forwarded to Joseph C. Grew, the American ambassador in Tokyo. His letter read, “The cold has come. Having heard from my elder brother that the American warship has sunk the other day I feel very sorry. Having been committed without intention beyond doubt, I apologize on behalf of the soldiers. Please forgive. Here is the money I saved. Please hand it to the American sailors injured.” The letter, featured in this article, was addressed “To the American sailors,” and was signed only, “One of the pupils of the Shin Kozen.” The boy did not provide his name in the letter, nor did he reveal it when visiting the consulate.

The American warship he referred to in his letter was the USS *Panay*, a flat-bottomed craft built in Shanghai, China, specifically for river duty. The USS *Panay* served as part of the U.S. Navy’s Yangtze Patrol in the Asiatic Fleet, which was responsible for patrolling the Yangtze River to protect American lives and property. On December 12, 1937, Japanese aircraft bombed and sunk the American navy gunboat.

After invading China in the summer of 1937, Japanese forces moved on the city of Nanking in December. *Panay* evacuated the remaining Americans from the city on December 11, bringing the number of people on board to five officers, fifty-four enlisted men, four U.S. embassy staff, and ten civilians. The following day, while upstream from Nanking, *Panay* and three Standard Oil tankers, *Mei Ping*, *Mei An*, and *Mei Hsia*, came under

attack from Japanese naval aircraft. On the *Panay*, three men were killed, and forty-three sailors and five civilians were wounded. Survivors were later taken on board the American vessel USS *Oahu* and the British ships HMS *Ladybird* and HMS *Bee*.

It was a nervous time for the American ambassador to Japan. He feared the *Panay* incident might lead to a break in diplomatic ties between Japan and the United States. Grew, whose experience in the Foreign Service spanned more than 30 years, remembered the *Maine*, the U.S. Navy ship that blew up in Havana Harbor in 1898. The sinking of the *Maine* had propelled the United States into the Spanish-American War; Grew hoped the sinking of the *Panay* would not be a similar catalyst.

The Japanese government took full responsibility for sinking the *Panay* but

continued to maintain that the attack had been unintentional. The formal apology reached Washington on Christmas Eve. Although Japanese officials maintained that their pilots never saw any American flags on the *Panay*, a U.S. Navy court of inquiry determined that several U.S. flags were clearly visible on the vessel during the attacks. Four days before the apology reached Washington, the Japanese government admitted that its army strafed the *Panay* and its survivors after the Japanese navy airplanes had bombed it. The Japanese government paid an indemnity of more than \$2 million (\$2,214,007.36) to the United States on April 22, 1938, officially settling the *Panay* incident.

Immediately after the *Panay* bombing, a lesser-known aspect of the story started to unfold. In the days following the *Panay* incident, Japanese nationals, including the young boy from Nagasaki, began sending letters and cards of sympathy to the American embassy in Tokyo, and to American consulates elsewhere in the country. Ambassador Grew wrote that:

never before has the fact that there are ‘two Japans’ been more clearly emphasized. Ever since the first news of the *Panay* disaster came, we have been deluged by delegations, visitors, letters, and contri-

butions of money—people from all walks of life, from high officials, doctors, professors, businessmen down to school children, trying to express their shame, apologies, and regrets for the action of their own Navy.

In addition, “highly placed women, the wives of officials, have called on Alice [Grew’s wife] without the knowledge of their husbands.” The ambassador noted, “that side of the incident, at least, is profoundly touching and shows that at heart the Japanese are still a chivalrous people.” These signs of sympathy arrived just as the ambassador was receiving word of possible atrocities being committed by Japanese forces in China.

While most letters of sympathy were sent to the embassy in Tokyo, a few were sent to the Navy Department in Washington, D.C. One noteworthy group of letters received by the Navy was from 37 Japanese girls attending St. Margaret’s School in Tokyo. The letters, each written in English and dated December 24, 1937, extended their apologies for the sinking of the *Panay*. By coincidence, the girls’ letters are dated the same day that the Japanese government’s formal apology reached Washington. The letters are very similar in content. The typical letter reads:

Dear Friend! This is a short letter, but we want to tell you how sorry we are for the mistake our airplane[s] made. We want you to forgive us I am little and do not understand very well, but I know they did not mean it. I feel so sorry for those who were hurt and killed. I am studying here at St. Margaret’s School which was built by many American friends. I am studying English. But I am only thirteen and cannot write very well. All my school-mates are sorry like myself and wish you to forgive our country. To-morrow is X-Mas, May it be merry, I hope the time will come when everybody can be friends. I wish you a Happy New Year. Good-bye.

Some of the girls enclosed postcards of beautiful Japanese places and scenes, while others sent Christmas cards and holiday wishes. One girl included a drawing of a Christmas candle burning bright with holly at the bottom. Several of the girls included their ages, which ranged from eight to thirteen. Some of the letters were written on intricately decorated stationery. Each envelope was identically addressed: “To the Family of the ‘Paney’ [*sic*] C/O U.S.A. Navy Department, Washington, DC U.S.A.” While each letter seems to be penned individually, the envelopes appear to have been addressed by the same person, possibly their teacher.

Three months later, a naval officer sent a reply to the principal of St. Margaret’s School, thanking the girls for the cards and letters. The officer noted, “The kind thoughts of the little girls are appreciated, and it is requested that you inform them of this acknowledgement.” Although the girls’ letters were addressed to the families of the *Panay* victims, it does not appear that they made it any further than the Navy Department.

Other letters from Japanese individuals and organizations contained gifts of money along with expressions of regret. These donations caused a problem for the Navy Department. One letter from 10 Japanese men expressed their sympathy over the *Panay* incident and included a check for \$87.19. The men claimed to be retired U.S. Navy sailors living in Yokohama, and the letter, written by Kankichi Hashimoto, stated “this little monetary gift is the instrument through which we hope to be able to further convey our sympathy with the bereaved families of the members of the *Panay*.” The Navy returned the check but informed the gentlemen that the U.S. ambassador in Tokyo had received a number of similar letters and gifts and that a committee was being formed in Japan to accept such donations. The donors were almost back to square one. They had originally approached the American consulate in Yokohama to donate 300 yen. The consular staff said that they could not accept the contribution and suggested donating

the money to the Japanese government. The former sailors turned down this suggestion and chose instead to send their donation to the Navy Department in Washington.

After being turned down by the Navy, Hashimoto approached the naval attaché at the American embassy in Tokyo with a check for 300 yen. The attaché, Capt. Harold Bemis, informed Ambassador Grew that a Mr. K. Hashimoto had brought in a contribution from the Ex-U.S. Navy Enlisted Men’s Association of Yokohama. Bemis further told the ambassador that Hashimoto requested that the names of the former sailors be withheld from the Japanese authorities and public. The donor feared that his group’s motives might be misconstrued because of their connection with the U.S. Navy but had no objection to their names being published in the United States.

Several American consulates were receiving money, too, including the consulates at Nagoya, Kobe, Nagasaki, and Osaka, in Japan; Taihoku, Taiwan; Keijo (Seoul), Korea; Dairen and Harbin in Manchuria; Capetown, South Africa; and São Paulo, Brazil. These contributions were eventually forwarded to the American embassy in Tokyo, where other letters and cards of sympathy and apology continued to pour in. While the ambassador attempted to turn away many of the donors, he explained to the secretary of state, “On the other hand, the donations are all of trivial amounts so that sentiment is chiefly involved in the problem and to return the donations might give rise to a misunderstanding of our attitude.” Grew kept all money received related to the *Panay* incident in the embassy safe until the State Department could find a solution.

State Department officials were concerned that accepting any money from the Japanese people might interfere with the official indemnity the Japanese government had already agreed to pay. Expressing his concern to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Grew wrote, “We realize that the acceptance of the donations for the purpose for which they are offered might prejudice the principle of

indemnification for which the Japanese Government has assumed liability.” The ambassador was in a difficult position: accepting the money posed one set of problems, while refusing the contributions posed another. Grew did not wish to offend the contributors, explaining that “logical grounds for refusal are difficult to explain to people who know of no other way to express their regrets over the disaster.”

Eventually, in April 1938, a trust fund was created in Japan to handle the *Panay* contributions. On April 19, the American embassy in Tokyo issued a statement to the press announcing the creation of the Japan-America Trust, which was being endowed in the name of the *Panay* survivors and relatives of those who lost their lives. The press release clearly stated that the *Panay* contributions were in no way related to the official settlement between the two nations but that “the donors have simply sought to express their sympathy by a procedure which is common in Japanese custom.”

The announcement appeared the following day in the *Japan Advertiser*. The English-language newspaper reported the amount of the fund at 37,000 yen with contributions from approximately 8,000 sympathizers. The paper also reported that the fund would be administered by Ambassador Joseph C. Grew and Prince Iyesato Tokugawa, president of the America-Japan Society, with a third trustee to be nominated later. In a letter to Tokugawa on April 12, Grew proposed Bishop Charles S. Reifsnider as the third trustee. The prince concurred two days later.

According to the article, embassy officials explained that the Japan-America Trust would be similar to the Pilgrim Trust Fund established in London for the repair of old monuments that memorialize Americans. Most likely, according to the paper, the Japan-America Trust would be used for the care of graves of American sailors buried in Japan.

The embassy prepared a form letter signed by Ambassador Grew to send to

donors to acknowledge their contributions and inform them of the establishment of the Japan-America Trust. Grew expressed his “hope and belief that the Japan-America Trust, receiving its original impulse from the feeling of sympathy with which the news of the PANAY incident was met in Japan, will become and remain an important foundation in the maintenance of friendship between the people of Japan and the people of the United States, appropriately symbolizing the generous feeling which has been manifested.” The Foreign Office in Tokyo, after learning of the establishment of the Japan-America Trust, felt it was up to the Japanese people to make the fund as large as possible.

On May 9, Prince Tokugawa wrote to Grew, “It is gratifying to me that the spirit which prompted the Japanese contributors is understood by your people and that the same spirit of sympathy and friendship has resulted in the establishment of this trust fund.” Tokugawa closed the letter, “I am sure that this Japan-American Trust

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TEACHING ACTIVITIES

1. Direct students to locate the following cities and features on a map of Asia: in China, the Yangtze River and the city of Nanking (Nanjing); in Japan, the cities of Tokyo and Nagasaki.
2. Distribute copies of both documents (the student’s letter and its translation, as well as the cover letter from Tower) to students. Ask one student to read them aloud while the others follow along. Lead a class discussion by posing the following questions: What types of documents are they? What are the dates of the documents? Who were the intended recipients? Who created them? For what purpose? (If you have a student who is able to read Japanese, encourage him/her to translate the letter for the class, and perhaps explain the use of syllables and characters in Japanese.)
3. Explain to students the circumstances surrounding the sinking of the USS *Panay*. Ask students to conduct research into the American reaction to the attack. Discuss with students the term “isolationism,” and ask them to what extent they think isolationism affected the nation’s reaction.
4. Ask students to define the word “diplomacy.” Share information from the above background essay with students about the many letters and donations received by the American ambassador and explain why the U.S. government had difficulty deciding what to do with the donations. Ask students to assume the role of a State Department official and draft a one-page proposal suggesting possible plans for the money received. Invite student volunteers to read their proposals aloud. Describe for students the actual creation of the Japan-America Trust and its objectives.
5. Write on the board Ambassador Grew’s statement that “never before has the fact that there are ‘two Japans’ been more clearly emphasized,” and ask students to write a short paragraph explaining what they think he meant. Invite student volunteers to share their paragraphs with the class.
6. Divide students into small groups, assign each a particular country, and ask them to gather information about the U.S. embassy in that country. Ask them to name the current ambassador, the location of the embassy, and discuss the main issues affecting the embassy and its staff today. A complete list of U.S. embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions is available from the State Department at usembassy.state.gov.
7. Foreign consulates exist in many large U.S. cities. If there is one close to you, invite a representative to speak to your students about his or her job and the daily operations at that facility. Encourage students to draft questions for the guest ahead of time. 🌐

Rec'd
DEC 30 1937

The Foreign Service
of the
United States of America

AMB
CON *SKD*
1st, Sec
2nd, Sec
2nd, Sec *CC*
2nd, Sec
P.S.

American Consulate,

Nagasaki, Japan, December 23, 1937. Action taken

*Enclosure deposited
Contributions listed*

The Honorable
Joseph C. Grew,
American Ambassador,
Tokyo.

Sir:

I have the honor to refer to my despatch of
December 21, 1937, on the same subject and to
forward a letter brought to this Consulate on
December 22 by a small boy who is a pupil of the
Shin Kozen Primary School, together with ¥2.00
in currency which were enclosed.

The donor, accompanied by his elder brother,
was received and thanked for his contribution,
but his name was withheld.

A translation of the letter is enclosed.

Respectfully yours,

Arthur F. Tower
Arthur F. Tower
American Consul

Enclosures:

As stated.

File No. 830.04/848
AFT/ty

おさまくなりました。

この間、アメリカの軍かんがしづんが、お話を
お兄さんから聞いて、ほんたうにお金のどく
だと思ひます。きつしりなつたので、すか
僕はへいたいさんにかはつて、あやまりませぬ。

ゆるしてぢやうだい。

このお金は、ぼくがため

たので、けがをした、アメリカの兵たいさんによげて
下へい。

新興善世といと

アメリカの兵たいさんへ、

TRANSLATION

The cold has come.

Having heard from my elder brother that the American warship has sunk the other day I feel very sorry. Having been committed without intention beyond doubt, I apologize on behalf of the soldiers. Please forgive. Here is the money I saved. Please hand it to the American sailors injured.

To the American sailors:

One of the pupils of
the Shin Kozen.

TS/ty

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Matt Williams—CEO of KnowledgeWorks Foundation and board member of Partnership for 21st Century Skills

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We hope to see you in Houston!



EMBRACE THE FUTURE



THE PANAY INCIDENT *from page 64*

which is now being established will long remain a symbol of friendship between the peoples of Japan and the United States.”

In the end, both sides appeared relieved with the outcome of the *Panay* contributions problem. The establishment of the Japan-America Trust removed any need to return the money, and no part of the U.S. government or any American national benefited from the donations.

Grew's description of the events after the *Panay* incident as demonstrating “two Japans” was very insightful. As the Japanese people expressed sympathy and regret through letters, cards, visits, and contributions, the ambassador was receiving telegrams of maltreatment of Chinese nationals and American citizens and property by Japanese military forces in China. While atrocities by Japanese forces in China strained relations between America and Japan, letters sent in the aftermath of the *Panay* incident expressed sincere hope that the two nations would remain friends. Two Japans indeed. 🇺🇸

References

- Grew, Joseph C., *Ten Years in Japan*. Simon Schuster: New York, 1944.
- Perry, Hamilton Darby. *The Panay Incident: Prelude to Pearl Harbor*. Macmillan: New York, 1969.

Note about the Documents

The documents featured in this article come from Records of the State Department, Record Group 84, and are held at the National Archives in College Park, Md.

TREVOR K. PLANTE is an archivist in the Old Military and Civil Records unit and **LEE ANN POTTER** is the director of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Potter serves as the editor for “Teaching with Documents,” a regular department of Social Education. You may reproduce the documents shown here in any quantity. For more information, write, call, or e-mail the education team at NARA, NWE, 700 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, D.C., 20408; education@nara.gov.