

# Shinto Priest from Ukraine Inscribes Prayers for Peace

Kamisato Sugawara Shrine in Kamisato-machi, Saitama Prefecture, Japan.

Ukrainian native Umebayashi Tatiana came to Japan on the occasion of marrying and has served as *Gonnegi*<sup>1</sup> priest at Kamisato Sugawara Shrine in Kamisato Town, northern Saitama Prefecture, since 2020. When the invasion of Ukraine began, she was deeply distressed by the situation in her home country, and has been distributing *goshuin*<sup>2</sup> (red seals given to shrine worshippers) to pray for peace.

Hara Erika

Tatiana is from Rakhiv, which is in western Ukraine near the border with Romania. While working as a Japanese and English teacher at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, she met Masaki, a fellow Japanese teacher and current *guuji* priest (*negi* at that time) of the Kamisato Sugawara Shrine. They came to Japan in 2009 and married. While assisting with shrine duties, such as preparations for the *Hatsumode*<sup>3</sup> (first shrine visit of the New Year) period, Tatiana became interested in Shinto.<sup>4</sup> When she learned that non-Japanese could also become priests, in 2020 she took a Shinto priest training course at Kokugakuin University and earned her certification. That same year, she was appointed *Gonnegi*, Junior priest of Kamisato Sugawara Shrine by the Association of Shinto Shrines.<sup>5</sup> Since then, Tatiana has performed

many Shinto rituals and inscribed and distributed rare *goshuin* red seals in Ukrainian and English.

“In my priesthood training, I studied a wide range of specialized knowledge, from classroom lectures on Japanese history and classics to practical skills, including the ways of *saishiki*, which are the Shinto rituals. Thanks to this training, I now understand the meaning behind each movement in a ritual. At a shrine, a priest offers prayers at the request of visitors for things like successful entrance exams, safe childbirth, recovery from illness, and prosperous business. I’m very happy that some of them call on me to pray for them. Now, since I want to be able to write *goshuin* in Japanese, I’m taking a calligraphy class to practice.”

On February 24, 2022, when the invasion of her native Ukraine began, Tatiana kept a sorrowful eye on the war-torn devastation in her birthplace

via TV news reports. Although her family had been living outside Ukraine since before the invasion (her parents and brother are in the Czech Republic and her sister is married and in Poland), she has other relatives and friends who are still in Ukraine.

“I was shocked, saddened, and



Tatiana inscribes words of hope for peace in a *goshuin* book.





Umebayashi Tatiana

angered to see the destruction in the country where I used to live, and I felt a sense of frustration that I couldn't do anything about it from so far away here in Japan.”

With the desire to convey her prayers and support for the return of peace to her homeland, immediately after the invasion she wrote the messages “Glory to Ukraine” in Ukrainian and “Stand with Ukraine” in English on Kamisato Sugawara Shrine’s Ukrainian and English language *goshuin* seals, and posted them on the shrine’s official social



*Goshuin* from Kamisato Sugawara Shrine with the inscription “Stand with Ukraine” in English (left) and “Glory to Ukraine” in Ukrainian (right).



*Senbazuru* in the colors of the Ukrainian flag, dedicated by local residents with prayers for peace.



Tatiana performs a Shinto ritual in her role as *Gonnegi*.

media sites. Those who saw the post and shared her sentiments visited the shrine one after the other in search of these *goshuin*. At one point, so many visitors from far away had come that a long line formed all the way to the shrine’s *torii* gate.<sup>6</sup>

“Everyone offered warm words, such as ‘May Ukraine be at peace,’ and ‘May life get back to normal.’ Some were even in tears as they sought to shake my hand.”

In addition to the *goshuin*, the shrine also shows it wishes for peace by having visitors tie ribbons of blue

and yellow (colors of the Ukrainian flag) to bannisters on the shrine grounds and by decorating the shrine with *senbazuru* (1,000 paper cranes)<sup>7</sup> made of blue and yellow paper dedicated by local residents. The shrine has also been holding *chohai* morning prayers for world peace once or twice a week without fail since the year of the invasion, and there is still no end to the number of visitors to the shrine.

“We can only pray, but we will keep on praying until the day of peace comes.”

1. A general term for one who serves the gods at a Japanese shrine. Also known as *Shinkan*. The position of a priest engaged in all aspects of Shinto rituals, including prayer. There is no consistent structure as there are differences among shrines, but there are several positions, with the *Guji* at the top, followed by *Gonguji*, *Negi*, and *Gonnegi*. The Kamisato Sugawara Shrine is dedicated to Sugawara Michizane (845-903), who is known as the god of academics.
2. A seal imprint received by a visitor to a shrine or temple as proof of visit.
3. The custom of visiting a shrine or temple at New Year to pray for a safe and happy year.
4. A religion or belief unique to Japan. It began as nature worship in ancient times and developed into a belief in *ujigami* (guardian deities) with the addition of beliefs in people and other things. Today, beliefs and rituals centered on shrines are generally recognized as Shinto.
5. An organization that includes the roughly 80,000 Shinto shrines in Japan (this number is from the 2020 *Shukyo Nenkan* (“Religious Yearbook”), published by Japan’s Agency for Cultural Affairs).
6. The gate built at the entrance to a shrine that separates the Shinto world from the ordinary world. What is beyond the *torii* is the domain of the gods and is considered sacred.
7. A string of numerous origami cranes strung together. Customarily offered to shrines and temples, and made during prayer.