



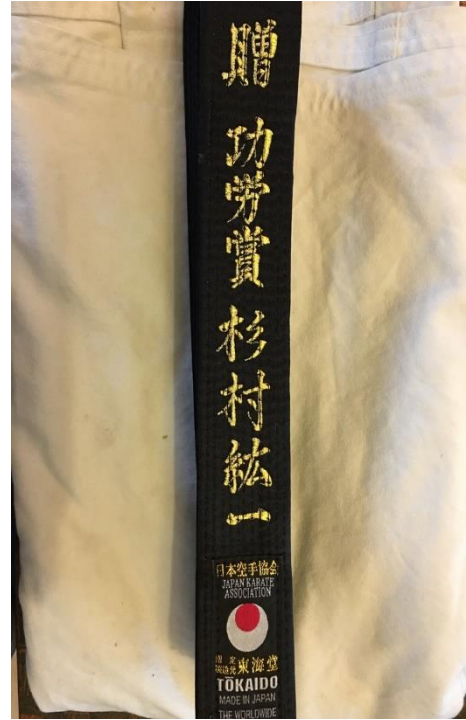
SWISS KARATEDO RENMEI YUDANSHAKAI

Member of Japan Karate Association

瑞西空手道連盟有段者会

# Memorial Ceremony for Koichi Sugimura sensei

Koichi Sugimura sensei, 24 March 1940 to 9 March 2020





**Koichi Sugimura sensei, founder of the Swiss Karate-Do Renmei, SKR**

The defining values of SKR are friendship, culture and tradition – that has been connecting us since 1969.



"You are no longer where you were,  
But you are everywhere, where we are."

*Victor Hugo*

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## Farewell

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*read by Masoud Mazhari*

*“The most difficult time in our lives is the best opportunity to develop inner strength.”*

*Dalai Lama.*

The point in time at which we lose a friend doesn't matter. It's always too early and it hurts.

Losing Sugi sensei as a dear friend and karate instructor hurts. We miss him. Family and friends are the most valuable things in life. Sugi sensei was an important member of our family. This is why the news of his death shook us deeply, although we knew he would leave us soon. He has passed away peacefully in the early hours on the 9th of March and has found eternal rest.

For over a year he fought against his illness so he would be able again to stand in the *karate gi* (which he always had with him). Brave, persistent and yet increasingly weakened, he was calm and peaceful at the end. In the last few weeks before his death, he returned to his old mischievous humour; and when he went, he was relieved of all burdens, as though he had done everything he had to do. He was always very grateful for visits from friends and companions of his path through life in karate, grateful in life and grateful we made the effort for him. Grateful to be there despite all the pain and momentary hopelessness.

Throughout this time, Corinne, his wife, cared for him with devotion and stood by him with her love. His greatest wish was to bid farewell to his loved ones and leave this life at home, in his familiar surroundings, and Corinne's love and courage made it possible. A life that has profoundly shaped our own – for which we have the privilege of being grateful to him.

On behalf of the mourning family, I extend special thanks to the entire team of doctors at the oncology ward of the Uster Hospital, in particular Dr. Tscherry, for their extraordinary and heartfelt commitment. Our gratitude also goes to the nursing service, especially to Hermann Schneider, who looked after Sugi sensei over a long period of time and especially during his final days and was a friend to him.

We would also like to thank the palliative care home in Wetzikon; it is given on the invitation card as the address to send donations instead of flowers.



## *Life in Japan*

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*read by Beni Isenegger*

*“A man who learns little, plods through life like an ox;  
he grows in flesh but not in mind.”*

This Buddhist saying could have been uttered by Sugi sensei himself. He was somebody who continued to educate himself, who questioned existing truths and dared to experiment with new things; who lived out his vision and demanded from us that we think for ourselves and follow our own path with passion. Taking the initiative was vital to him! And he wanted to pass on his philosophy to us.

For instance, when we weren't paying attention in training and didn't do what he wanted to teach us, then he would say in his inimitably direct but nevertheless gentlemanly manner of speaking: “Is like eating boiled meat. Little pieces get stuck between your teeth. Is not so bad but is sometimes bothersome.” A truly motivating saying!

Taking the initiative was one of his outstanding qualities that characterised his journey from Japan to us here in far-away Europe.

Koichi Sugimura was the fourth and last child in his family, born on 24 March 1940 in what is now South Korea. His father was a respected lawyer who served as a prosecutor for the Japanese government and was in charge of the non-Japanese territories during World War II. Hence South Korea. Sugi himself described his first years as carefree. Most of the time he spent on the beach. From an early age, he learnt how to organise his days on his own.

His two brothers Hideo and Shuzo were 18 and 10 years older than him and weren't particularly interested in what the youngest member of the family was doing all day long. His sister Mizuko, however, had the task of keeping the wildcat in check.

After the end of the war, the family moved back to Japan, to the southern island of Kyushu. The country was in ruins and its population traumatised – a stark contrast to the boy's familiar surroundings, something that initially shocked Sugi but also taught him to fight for his own goals. In Fukuoka, he visited one of the oldest grammar schools in Japan, called “Shuyukan”. Shuyukan, which means – translated freely – something in the nature of “building for mastering one's own way”: there cannot be a more apt slogan for someone like Sugi who chooses an unusual life in a difficult time. At the age of 17, Sugi graduated from secondary school and moved to Tokyo, hoping he would be accepted at the prestigious Keio University to study law.

At Japanese universities, the main selection does not take place during the course of studies but during the admission exams. Sugi worked hard. Still, he had to wait two years to become more mature before he could begin his studies. During this time, karate began to play a vital part in his life. Although he had already started with karate in Fukuoka when he was 16, his heart wasn't really in it, as he put it later. In Tokyo, he met Master Michihara Shinji, a renowned karate teacher for *shotokan* and *wado-ryu*. “I was weak and wanted to be strong...” No sooner said than done! He trained with great motivation and discipline and did his black belt after only two years. Around the same time (1958), he started studying in law school but kept up the intensive karate training under sensei Michihara. Again, Sugi sensei remained an exception: As a student, he didn't switch to one of the university sports clubs. He stayed faithful to his old *dojo*. Michihara sensei taught Sugi that karate promoted not only distinct physical strength and skills but completely different values as well. Although these virtues played a minor role for the young student at the time – because he wanted to fight – in the long run, they took on pivotal importance for him. This was how

Sugi sensei formed the SKR later: training with physical hardness and brains, always aware of the cultural background and in the service of friendship. And enshrine all this as a tradition.

## *The road to Europe*

*read by Christian Mundwyler*

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*“Even a journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step.” Buddhist saying*

In retrospect, taking a step out into the wide, extremely uncertain world looks pretty simple. But we must bear in mind that Sugi sensei had a law degree from one of Japan’s most prestigious universities in his pocket, which would have given him financial security and social status at home. He chose another, uncertain road: He left Japan. He didn’t really have specific plans, but his curiosity and his openness were great. From his childhood on, he had always loved fishing, the vastness of the sea and uninhabited stretches of land. Canada would have been a good contrast to what he knew of densely populated Japanese cities. He travelled to Europe through the then Soviet Union by the Trans-Siberian Railway with the idea at the back of his mind that “later he might found a shrimp-fishing farm in Canada”, as he later related.

In late 1965, Sugi sensei arrived in Germany. At first, he lived in Düsseldorf; later, he moved to southern Germany, where he met Eugen Müller and Wolfgang Hagedorn. At their request, he stayed put there and taught karate in Freiburg im Breisgau. His way of teaching karate techniques and embodying the spirit of karate impressed the German karate pioneers, and friendships developed from there. Soon his reputation reached Switzerland, when individual representatives of the emerging Swiss karate scene ventured into the Freiburg halls and marvelled at all the things this Japanese man had to pass on. Jürgen Stutterich (who will read after me), Otto Zimmerli and Rolf Hauri were the first to see Sugi sensei in action and they wanted to lure him to Switzerland. Soon other well-known greats of these early days followed suit and did a pilgrimage to Germany: Heinz Engel, Rolf Bänziger, Daniel Grabenstaetter and Annemarie Pfeiffer, who become the first woman to wear a *dan* in Switzerland.

Sugi sensei kept in touch with numerous JKA instructors, who taught in Europe. When Nakayama sensei, founder and then chief instructor of the JKA, did karate in Europe, Sugi sensei was appointed to be his official interpreter. The German head trainer, appointed by the JKA in 1970, Ochi sensei, also immediately recognised Sugi sensei’s special skills. Ochi sensei and Sugi sensei kept up a profound friendship throughout their lives. The karate world frequently had the privilege of enjoying these two Japanese masters together in *gasshukus* both in Germany and Switzerland.

In 1969, Sugi sensei was appointed the official JKA representative for Switzerland. That same year, he moved to Schaffhausen; as early as 1967 he had been a karate instructor in Winterthur, where he also lived for a while. Soon Lenzburg was also on his list, and together with people from these three clubs, Sugi sensei founded the SKR. Basel was added shortly thereafter; Arbon a little later. Subsequently, Sugi sensei founded his own *dojos* in Zurich (on Hohlstrasse). He taught regularly all-Swiss teams at the KVZ on Escher-Wyss-Platz (many of us sweated our heads off there), at Letziggraben and at Zurich University (ASVZ). After that, he established the large *dojos* in Dürnten, Rümlang, Volketswil and Rüti; the last two sites under the name of “Shuyukan”. He didn’t run all these schools at the same time but got involved where and when it seemed necessary to him. His wish to give all trainees a real *hombu dojo*, a karate home for everyone, drove him from one place to the next.

Sugi sensei not only had a huge impact on karate as a popular sport in Switzerland. He was as successful in competing in tournaments, beginning with his team's victory in the prestigious finals for men in the 1976 European Championship

against the English team, which towered over them under the aegis of Enoeda sensei; many other international victories with teams and individual athletes; and the long-lasting dominance in national championships.

He has impacted the karate scene in Switzerland like no other has, not only in the sports arena as such but also in other areas. Everybody who wanted to do karate and be instructed in it was important to him. This is why he is leaving behind such a well-functioning structure in competitive and popular sports, all based on the joy in doing karate and on friendship.

### *The early days in Switzerland*

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*Read by Jürgen Stutterich and René Weber*

*"Transform big difficulties into small ones and small ones into none at all." Buddhist saying*

The karate scene in Switzerland was virtually non-existent when Sugi sensei arrived in Europe. At that time, we were a handful of enthusiasts who met mainly in judo *dojos* to practice punches and kicks. When we heard that a man from Japan was instructing people in this exotic martial art in nearby Freiburg im Breisgau, we couldn't hold ourselves back – we just had to visit the master.

Sugi sensei exceeded all our expectations: The precision of his technique, the communication of context and background and the friendliness he displayed to us, who were complete strangers to him, were more than we hoped for and constituted the final nudge to turn us into full-fledged karate fans. Of course, we wanted to have the master instructor with us back in Switzerland. If he was considering pitching his tent in Switzerland, we were happy to help him.

At that time, it wasn't possible to live as a professional practitioner of karate per se. Nonetheless, Sugi sensei moved to Winterthur in 1967 and instructed daily at the Winthertur budo club. He wanted to live in Switzerland because of his girlfriend (and later first wife) Christie – so they both wouldn't be foreigners – and so he moved to our burg.

At first, everybody was happy with the arrangement. But soon, envy of the charismatic Japanese master raised its ugly head in the budo club, and some club members (with no karate blood in their veins) got Sugi sensei upset repeatedly. Although there was no open quarrel, he moved to Schaffhausen.

I myself as well as Heinz Engel followed suit and moved to Schaffhausen, too. We didn't want and couldn't do without the outstanding instruction and teaching Sugi sensei provided. Nor could we do without his warmth and kindness!

Many of us have a hard time imagining what a day-to-day world of karate looked like in these early days. Sugi sensei arrived in Schaffhausen in 1969. He moved in with Rolf Bänziger's brother in Schaffhausen, into a small room, got free room and board plus one hundred Swiss francs a month. For this, he took over the karate courses. Who would do that today – with a law degree in his pocket? He always refused to link his work as an SKR instructor with financial benefits. The culture of giving, which is so deeply rooted in the SKR, was essentially established by Sugi sensei.



Why indeed did Sugi sensei choose to become a karate instructor and not a lawyer? He could easily have passed the bar and become a lawyer in his new homeland. He himself once said: "Karate makes demands on the body and the mind, not just on one of them. That's attractive, because it is an interminable process, lifelong training and instruction accompanied by a constant gentle progress. A spiritual search for freedom."

From the first second on, Sugi sensei was *the* sensei. When, after a strenuous training session, we traipsed to a restaurant and addressed him as sensei, he raised his hand and said: You must call me Sugi. He often told jokes. They always started with "A man came home drunk one day...." At this point, we were already laughing, and he always said: "But I'm not done yet." After he finished his joke, nobody laughed, because we never understood the punchline. Then he always made such a contrite face that we had to laugh. Those were great moments that encapsulated the two great personalities of Sugi sensei: the sensei and Sugi the friend.

### *Sugi sensei as a karate instructor and as a private person*

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*"There is only one time when it is essential to wake up. This time is now." Gautama Buddha*

#### *Private experience of Andrea Kennel with Sugi sensei*

I had the great fortune of becoming acquainted with and knowing Sugi sensei not only as a teacher but also as a very inspiring and highly appreciated person in my life. He was an important companion of mine throughout many phases of my life.

As our trainer when I was young, he demanded everything from us. Technical subtleties were practised over and over again; little details had to be performed by us more and more exactly, more dynamically and ever better.

Sugi sensei was an advocate of "traditional karate" and set clear priorities in fostering karate as a sport. I loved the combination of dynamic techniques that had a great impact and intelligent, flexible tactical responses.

Later, when he transferred the primary responsibility for competitive sports to younger men and women, he focused in his teaching of karate on health aspects. Here too we came together because I was dedicating myself more and more to this subject area. We exchanged ideas, which was quite an inspiration to me. One of the outstanding qualities of Sugi sensei was his willingness to learn from all and sundry. I often marvelled at how well informed he was about various fields

and I always knew him to be intellectually alert and quick-witted. Although he kept up with the times, he always had his own, very special Sugi view of things.

Every one of you knew him in your own way and will take home a very personal memory of him. I for one treasure within me how grateful Sugi was for the little things in life, a good meal, a fine glass of wine and a lively discussion. In our youth we sweated copiously and had many, many laughs together throughout those years. For that, I thank him from my heart.

#### *Personal experience of Hanspeter Rüttsche with Sugi sensei*

Sugi sensei was the first to introduce children's karate training in late 1982; it took place at the *karate kai* of Sportcenter Dürnten. Another proof of his remarkable prescience, from which I

benefited as a young boy at the age of 8, because I attended the very first beginner's course for children.

For the next 38 years, Sugi sensei accompanied me through all the phases of my "karate life", as a teacher and trainer, master and, above all, as a fatherly friend. He was a fixed star for me in all situations, through all the turmoil of my karate-oriented life, and he also helped with sound advice on other practical issues in life.

Two days before I took part in a world championship at the Olympic Stadium in Munich, Sugi sensei showed me that the *tatamis* were the exact same size as the ones in the *dojo* at home, so I should concentrate on my *kata* and wash away my nervousness with a sip of beer.

About two years ago, when Sugi sensei ended the training for adults in Uster, he asked me whether he could hold a karate training course for children together with me at the Shuyukan Rütli *dojo*. This joint karate course for kids was not only fascinating for the children. It was also a very moving experience, and I felt I'd truly come full circle.

Toward the end of this training course, Sugi sensei said: "Hanspeter, these children are your future. Be gentle, but they have to learn to sweat, so you also have to be tough with them sometimes...." Like so many of his sayings and analogies, these words are immortalised in my heart and make me smile as I ponder them.

## *What Sugi sensei bequeathed to us*

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*Read by Tommaso Mini*

*"Those who feel too big to perform small tasks are too small to be entrusted with big things."  
Buddhist saying*

What has Sugi sensei bequeathed to us?

The philosophy of the SKR can be described in three words: "friendship, culture, tradition". We embody and live out these words. And that is the bequest of Sugi sensei. He was more than a master in karate techniques or in the teaching of karate. He is and will always be for us a great master in the art of critical thinking and of connecting people. Culture and tradition were only worthwhile to him if both were open and receptive to new ideas and when they were based on essential human values such as trust.

We will remember Sugi sensei for his modesty. He was never above training with the other students when we had guest instructors from other styles. As an instructor, he accepted accommodations that were not so nice or farther away if they were assigned to him. He didn't want any special status. He only wanted to be treated respectfully just as he treated his fellow human beings, too, with respect. For many of us, this quality of modesty made him into a dear friend, because he allowed closeness.

Sugi sensei always demonstrated a pronounced sense of fairness and justice. He was always open to any and all and rejected any form of a two-tier society. He didn't believe that ancestry, rank and status gave somebody special rights and privileges. For this reason, he didn't allow for any sub-sections in the SKR. Anybody who wanted be instructed in karate was welcome and had the same rights as all. He wanted us to be a group of karate enthusiasts who were also friends.

Enthusiasm and passion are qualities that Sugi sensei exemplified throughout his own life: train intensively with motivation, become active by taking the initiative and don't wait until prompted by orders. He was proud that we at the SKR keep up this culture.

He was an incredible strategist. He thought a lot about the issues involving Swiss and international karate and was able to imagine the next step, and the following one and the one after that. His solutions were never selfish or power-oriented. Instead, they were always for those who want to stand in the *gi* and practise karate.

Sugi sensei will always be in our hearts as a friendly, humble man who tackled the so-called seriousness of life with a great deal of humour; who was able to see things always from a different point of view and thus still inspires us today to think for ourselves and find our own path.

What did he bequeath to us? Enthusiasm, being mindful of the small things in life and being grateful for them; the love for karate and dealing with one another in a mindful way. For him, leadership was not power, not some legitimate domination over others but a way of wanting to walk a path together with conviction. That is his legacy to us.

Sugi sensei went from us as a spiritually free man. Just as he has always supported us in our autonomous decisions and being spiritually free. It would have been his wish for us to cultivate our karate culture in friendship, continue to live its core values, so they may be firmly enshrined in tradition.

## *Letter from Japan by Ogura sensei, Vice Chief Instructor, JKA*

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*We just received a letter from Ogura sensei, who would have loved to come to our memorial ceremony. Due to the COVID restrictions, he was not allowed to travel from Japan to Switzerland. Kathrin Broder is reading:*

Dear Master Sugimura Koichi,

I was so surprised to hear that you passed away on March 9th .

Because I saw your healthy face at the Swiss Camp last summer. At the end of the training camp, you asked with a handshake and a smile for us to meet again next year. I feel like this was only yesterday. I never doubted that I would meet you again this year.

I can imagine how sad Mrs. Corinne Sugimura and the JKA Switzerland board members along with all the members of JKA Switzerland are.

Looking back, I joined the JKA Switzerland Summer Camp for the first time when I was 28 years old. Since then, we've had a close relationship for 34 years. I even brought my students to the Summer Camp when I was a director of Taisho University Karate Club. The students still miss and have good memories of the Camp.

Do you remember the day we drank from midday onward when the Camp was held in Lucerne? We three, you, Master Ochi from Germany and I joined the party held in the evening, but none of us could walk straight. We had such countless joyful, happy and fun memories.

"To be as you are." I think these words are exactly for you. The person who behaved with the same attitude towards everyone. The person who nurtured members with warm and generous eyes and who took care of the relationships from person to person through Karate training. You were exactly such a person, and I learned a lot from your way of life.

It has been 6 months since Master Sugimura passed away, but the sadness and pain in Mrs. Corinne Sugimura and JKA members still remains with us. But he lives inside your hearts and will live forever.

Sugimura Shihan, please keep watching over all of us and JKA Switzerland.

Last but not least, I am grateful for your long relationship with me. Thank you very much, Sugimura Shihan. I really appreciate you.

Please have a good rest in peace.

Sincerely yours,

Yasunori Ogura, Deputy Shuseki Shihan

## *Letter from Japan by Seizo Fujimura sensei*

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Read by Tommaso Mini

Dear karate friends,

The death of Mr. Sugimura came suddenly and unexpectedly.

I believe he was one of those who lived a meaningful life in Switzerland through *karate do*.

I always felt attracted to his liberal thoughts. He was one of the friends who enriched my life in Switzerland.

As I pray for the health and happiness of all who have gathered here, I want to voice my deeply felt thanks to Mr. Sugimura, express my sympathy to all and wish him happiness in Heaven.

With kind regards,

Seizo Fujimura

## *Letter from JKA Europe*

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We have received a letter of condolence from JKA Europe. JKA Europe wants to express condolences on the occasion of Sugimura sensei's death and wishes his family and JKA Switzerland all the strength they need.

## *Letter from Omura sensei, JKA Thailand*

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A letter of condolence from Omura sensei, JKA Thailand, has reached us. With deeply felt sympathy, Omura sensei wishes to express his sorrow over the death of Sugimura sensei. He wishes the family and JKA Switzerland all the strength they need.

Omura sensei had been a guest instructor at the summer *gasshuku* of the SKR for many years. Sugimura sensei in turn has often taught at the JKA *gasshuku* in Thailand. The two masters not only appreciated each other greatly as teachers but they were also friends.



## *Family grave of Sugi sensei in Fukuoka, Japan*

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The name of Koichi Sugimura sensei was added to the existing family grave in Fukuoka, Japan.

## *Sugi sensei's new name according to the Buddhist ceremony in Japan*

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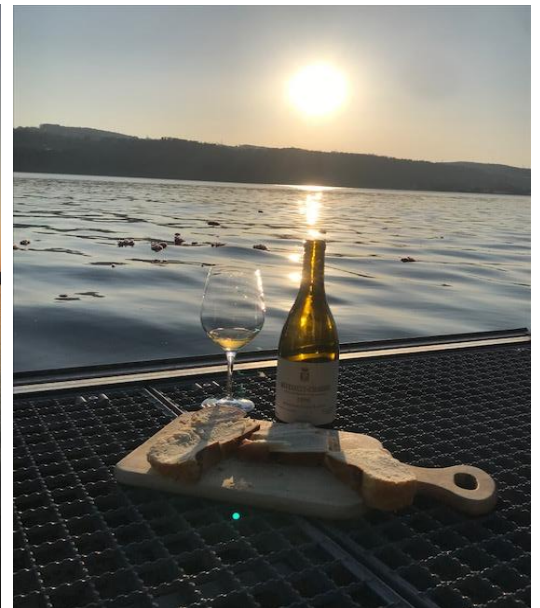
According to Buddhist practice, each person receives a new name after his demise that describes the earthly activities of the human being in question. After the ceremony in Japan, the new name was engraved on the traditional name board on the left, on the black board on the right:

Koichi Sugimura's new name is: **"The sensei who taught and spread karate in Switzerland"**.



## *The funeral*

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The funeral took place on 24th March 2020, the 80th birthday of Sugi sensei, and was attended by his immediate family.

Burial at Greifensee

Burning of the empty urn at home of the Sugimura family



The cherry blossom  
makes me recall  
so many things.

Bashô, Japanese poet



Koichi Sugimura sensei  
24 March 1940 to 9 March 2020



**SWISS KARATEDO RENMEI YUDANSHAKAI**  
Member of Japan Karate Association

**瑞西空手道連盟有段者会**

友愛—文化と伝統を結ぶ



**Freundschaft  
Kultur  
Tradition**

verbindet seit 1969



## *Acknowledgements*

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SWISS KARATE-DO RENMEI SKR, member of JKA, would like to express its gratitude, also on behalf of the family, of all friends and guests who have travelled here and all those who followed the ceremony via video.

Our special thanks go to the DJKB, which was represented at the ceremony by Ochi sensei and an official delegation.