

Sake brewery “Otokoyama Honten” in Kesenuma City, Miyagi – Symbol of Reconstruction –



The main office building after the earthquake and tsunami



Sake brewery of Otokoyama Honten

Otokoyama Honten, a sake brewery in Kesenuma City, Miyagi Prefecture, was founded in 1912. Its three-story main office building, constructed around 1931, was designated as an cultural property by the government in 2003 for having kept the cityscape of the early years of the Showa period (1926-1989). On the day of the Great East Japan Earthquake, the building was destroyed by a vessel which was washed up by the tsunami. The brewery’s warehouse, where raw materials were stored, was washed away. However, the tsunami stopped a few meters short of the entrance to its brewing house, which was on higher ground. Thus, brewing equipment and tanks (in which sake

was brewed and stored) escaped damage. Today, Otokoyama Honten produces and ships sake brewed with the equipment that escaped damage.

At the time of the earthquake, fermenting mash for the “Sotenden” sake brand was contained in two tanks inside the brewery’s warehouse. To protect the unrefined mash, the brewery’s president, Akihiko Sugawara, went to the brewing house the next morning of the earthquake with two of his employees. As there was no electric power, water or gas supply, Mr. Sugawara continued the work to control the fermentation of the mash by using ice found in the brewing house and a battery-operated thermometer because control of temperature is important during fermentation.

Ten days after the earthquake, the unrefined mash was ready for the press, though a little ahead of the original plan. There was still no electricity or water, although, to press the unrefined mash, electricity for operating the machine and water for cleaning are necessary. If fermentation further continued, the mash would not make good sake. As ice ran out, as well as electricity and water were not available, Mr. Sugawara was at a loss. When walking in town one day, he found a large generator with the help of some local residents. They also helped him find a truck to carry the generator, fuel to operate it, wiring for electricity, and water. He managed to install the generator with the help of friends. He then was able to press the fermented mash for the first bottle of sake on March 21 and for the second bottle on March 24.

Mr. Sugawara says that at that time he had strong qualms about using a lot of electricity and water to press the mash when the entire city had been stricken by the disaster, with many people having lost everything and there was no electricity or water supply in town. However, every person who had helped him urged him to continue, saying, “the tsunami has destroyed many industries and almost all of our local products are gone. Fortunately, your brewing house still remains. We want you to keep on at any cost.” These words prompted Mr. Sugawara to press the mash to make sake.

After the earthquake, this story of Otokoyama Honten was widely covered by the Japanese press, and orders poured in from across the country from people who wished to help the brewery. Mr. Sugawara tells his employees that they are making this sake not for the company but for the people of Kesennuma City. He also tells them that it is the mission of a surviving producing facility to stabilize production, employ more local residents and continue to promote Kesennuma. Mr. Sugawara hopes to cultivate new marketing channels in the future rather than depending on his supporters, and keep the company going.