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Reflections on Hiroshima and the Anti-Nuclear Movement

By Lawrence S. Wittner

In late July 2004, as I opened the window curtains of my posh room in the Rihga Royal Hotel and looked out at the city of Hiroshima, I was struck by how marvelously it had been restored. Fifty-nine years ago, Hiroshima had been nearly obliterated by the fire and blast of the U.S. atomic bombing, which killed 140,000 people by the end of 1945 and left tens of thousands of others dying slowly and painfully from radiation poisoning. Now the city had been thoroughly rebuilt, with its sea of modern buildings, surrounded by green mountains, glittering in the sunshine. More than a million people lived there.

Decades ago, Danilo Dolci, the Italian pacifist, had criticized the rebuilding of Hiroshima, claiming that its ruins should be left as a symbol of the horrors of nuclear war. It was a harsh judgment, but I could understand his point. If the human race could tidy up from its murderous nuclear follies this well, what would prevent it from repeating them? In a variety of forms, this question pressed heavily upon me throughout my stay in Japan.

I was visiting the country for ten days to lecture on nuclear disarmament-related issues. As the author of a recently-completed trilogy, The Struggle Against the Bomb, I had been asked to speak at the Hiroshima Peace Institute, at the Peace Research Institute of Meiji Gakuin University (in Tokyo), at various venues in Tokyo and Hiroshima as a guest of Gensuikin (the Japan Congress Against Atomic & Hydrogen Bombs), and by the Hiroshima Association for Nuclear Weapons Abolition. Through these talks and conversations with activists, I probably learned more from the Japanese than they learned from me.

In a number of ways, the Japanese peace and disarmament movement was experiencing a difficult time. Although it continued to constitute a powerful presence in the nation's life, its membership was declining and young people, particularly, did not seem to be drawn to it. Symptomatically, the number of visitors to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum was dwindling. To many Japanese, the antinuclear campaign seemed frozen in time, irrelevant to contemporary events. In addition, Gensuikin, one of the two major nuclear disarmament groups in Japan, had been undermined by the collapse of the staunchly antimilitarist Socialist Party and by the ebbing strength of the labor movement--for decades its two key pillars of support. Meanwhile, the leaders of the ruling conservative party (Japan's misnamed Liberal Democratic Party) were pressing to "revise" Article 9, the antiwar clause of Japan's constitution. They had even begun to talk about developing nuclear weapons for Japan. Also, there was great frustration at the militarism of the Bush administration--particularly its war on Iraq, its abandonment of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and its plan to build new nuclear weapons.

Overall, then, there was a sense of frustration and, at times, pessimism, among peace-minded Japanese. Again and again, I heard the question raised: With the hibakusha (the survivors of the atomic bombing) now elderly and dying, who will take up their key role in the nuclear disarmament campaign? Indeed, during a Gensuikin-organized press conference, I was asked that question by a Japanese reporter, I did my best to answer it, but the question lingers.

On the other hand, Japan's nuclear disarmament campaign had a level of strength and integration in the broader society that North American peace groups might well envy. Gensuikin's annual conference, which opened in Hiroshima on August 4, drew 3,500 registered participants. Its opening session, with thousands of activists in attendance, featured powerful antinuclear speeches not only by Iwamatsu Shigetoshi and Fukuyama Shingo (the chair and secretary general of Gensuikin), but by Akiba Tadatoshi (Mayor of Hiroshima and Chair of Mayors for Peace, a worldwide organization) and the president of Rengo, a labor federation. Its press conference was covered sympathetically by major Japanese newspapers. Its local groups, many headed by labor union activists, worked throughout Japan on issues ranging from opposing nuclear weapons, to defending Article 9, to agitating against the expansion of U.S. military bases.

Furthermore, Japan's nuclear disarmament movement found a powerful supporter in Hiroshima's Mayor Akiba. A mathematician who was educated at MIT and, despite his progressive views, elected to the highest office in this rather conservative city, Akiba was a dynamic proponent of the movement. His administration had given substantial funding to the Hiroshima Peace Institute and, in 2004, its staff members and the speakers at its annual symposium (including this writer) were wined and dined by the mayor at his official residence.

Addressing Hiroshima's annual atomic bombing commemoration ceremony on August 6, Akiba delivered an eloquent plea for the abolition of nuclear weapons. "The city of Hiroshima," he stated, "along with the Mayors for Peace and our 611 member cities in 109 countries and regions," had declared the period through the following August a "Year of Remembrance and Action for a Nuclear-Free World." The goal would be the signing of a Nuclear Weapons Convention in 2010 and the abolition of nuclear weapons by 2020. He also denounced "the egocentric view of the U.S. government" (which had been "ignoring the United Nations and its foundation of international law"), criticized terrorists for their "reliance on violence-amplifying" strategies, and condemned North Korea and other nations for "buying into the worthless policy of `nuclear insurance.'"

The August 6 commemoration ceremony at which Akiba spoke was impressive. Boy scouts and girl scouts distributed bouquets of

flowers to participants, school children attended in large numbers, and perhaps 20,000 people turned out for the event, conducted in the Peace Park under a broiling sun. A representative of the United Nations delivered a speech by Secretary-General Kofi Annan that warned of "the shadow of nuclear war hanging over our world." Two local sixth graders spoke of children's stake in world peace. Even conservative Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro addressed the assemblage, professing his concern for peace and nuclear disarmament--although members of the audience later criticized his mumbled statement, which, given his dispatch of Japanese troops to Iraq and disdain for Article 9, they considered hypocritical.

(TV Asahi)

The most moving events occurred that evening, when thousands of people gathered to float colored lanterns down Hiroshima's rivers in honor of the lives lost in the atomic bombing. Unlike the commemoration ceremony, this was an informal venture, and the milling crowds, diverse music, and disparate activities in the adjoining Peace Park gave it a more spontaneous flavor.
As our small group of Gensuikin activists and their overseas guests wended its way through the crowd, we came upon the Children's Peace Monument, a statue of young Sasaki Sadako. At age two, Sadako had survived the atomic attack on Hiroshima; but, at twelve, she was stricken by radiation-induced leukemia. Despite the pain, she began folding paper (origami) cranes in the hope of a cure, for there is a Japanese legend that if one folds a thousand cranes, one will be granted a wish. Sadako, however, died before reaching that number. Thereafter, her grief-stricken friends completed the process, and ever since then millions of Japanese schoolchildren--and people around the world--have folded cranes in her memory.

As we approached Sadako's statue, I noticed the vast number of tiny cranes that had been so carefully folded and strung together. And there was a group of young Japanese schoolchildren on the site, singing songs of peace. The children, I thought, were absolutely beautiful, and as I listened to their high-pitched voices raised in song, I had to make an effort not to burst into tears. How could the rulers of nations have approved the atomic bombing of such children in the past? How could they still be making plans to slaughter them in the future?

Mulling over my experiences in Japan, I think that people should worry less about Hiroshima's reconstruction and the aging of the hibakusha. We do not require the ruins of cities or even the testimony of survivors to remind us of the need to reject nuclear weapons. We have only to look at the beauty of the world--and especially its children--to understand that nuclear war is a monstrous crime, and act to prevent its repetition.

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