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The Pain of Remembering August 6, 1945

Hiroshima Hibakusha reflect on the bomb, the war, their lives, and the nuclear age. (Korean translation available)

By David McNeill

"The plane came out of a clear blue sky," says Yamaoka Michiko, and you can't help recalling the now iconic video footage of the hijacked Boeing 767 as it sailed into the World Trade Center's north tower.

But Yamaoka is remembering not the horrors of 9/11 but those of Hiroshima 60 years ago, when an atomic bomb detonated as she walked from her house into the city's center on Aug. 6, 1945. The only warning was the familiar drone of a single B-29.

Yamaoka's 15-year-old face was destroyed in an instant. Even today, after over two dozen operations and under heavy make-up, it looks mottled and lumpy, like it has been reconstructed from burnt clay. She rarely looks at interviewers directly.

As she flew through the air from the force of the blast, Yamaoka knew she'd been bombed. "I thought: 'Goodbye Mother' in my heart." It was her mother who helped pull her from the wreckage; face swollen like a balloon, skin hanging from her arms in ribbons.

"I lost all my hair and there was blood when I went to the toilet. My face was so awful I hid for a long time. If I had been alone I probably would have killed myself but my mother was there every day taking care of me, even though she was sick herself. I stayed alive for her. She told me to live."

Her mother died in 1979; when they cremated her body they found shards of glass in the ashes, still embedded deep in her body from the force of the bomb.

Like many of the 270,000 hibakusha or survivors of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Yamaoka lives with constant pain. She has fought breast cancer, thinning bones and depression, and grimaces when she moves around her tiny apartment. "My body hurts, but it is more painful to remember what I saw that day, although I feel I have to."

By the end of Aug. 6, 160,000 people were killed or injured; many more died afterwards from the effects of the bomb.

In Nagasaki, which was bombed three days after Hiroshima, 74,000 people died within less than a year as the city became, in the famous words of its mayor, a place of death "where not even the sound of insects could be heard."
Survivors who thought they had escaped have been haunted by illness. Hitoshi Takayama developed cancer in his back and hip. Much of the muscle from his back was removed, he says, asking me to touch it. It feels bony and cold. "I don't mind showing people my injuries if it teaches them about what happened."

Numata Suzuko was 20 and days from marriage in Hiroshima when a collapsed building shattered her left leg. Three days later her leg was amputated below the knee, without anesthetic. "I screamed so hard when the saw cut it off," she says.

"We used to chant during the war 'Be united in one mind like a fireball, 100 million people,' she recalls. "Then when the bomb fell the trucks came around and ignored women and children, and just helped the healthy men. We were no use to them. That's when I first understood what war really was."

She later learned that her fiancee had been killed. Like many women injured in the blast, she has never married, victims of what they call 'hibakusha discrimination:' the radiation was believed contagious; many feared they would give birth to deformed children.

Tsuboi Sunao: A-Bomb survivor, standing in front of one of the few pictures taken in the first days of the bombing and in which he can recognize himself between the wounded. Tsuboi was a 20-year-old university student when he was blown 10 meters into the air by the blast from the bomb and burnt from head to toe.

©2005 C. ANDRONIKI "Even the Sound of Insects Couldn't Be Heard"
Men suffered discrimination too. "Nobody wanted to marry someone who might die in a couple of years," says Sunao Tsuboi, who was burnt from head to toe in the aftermath of the Hiroshima bomb before falling into a coma. When he came to the war was over but he refused to believe it. "I thought it was a trick."

"We were watched very closely to see if we would die." Later he fell in love with a girl whose parents refused to give them permission to marry. "We decided to commit suicide together and took pills but we didn't take enough. When we woke up and cried together we were so happy to be alive."

TERAMAE TAEKO: Hiroshima A-bomb survivor, sitting at the riverbank inside the Peace Memorial Park, in front of the remains of the A-bomb Dome. On the 6th of August 1945 Teramae was a third-year high school student and worked part-time in Hiroshima Central Telephone Office. She was at work when the bomb fell and was badly injured by broken glass which destroyed her right eye.

©2005 C. ANDRONIKI. "We Don't Intend to Play up Our Victim-hood"

Deep, unspeakable suffering, said the British writer George Eliot, "can be a baptism, a regeneration; the initiation into a new state." Once a major military hub, Hiroshima is transformed today into an airy, tree-lined city of one million people that nurses its wounds very publicly, with museums, memorial parks, peace boulevards and the famous hollowed-out Dome.

Writer Ian Buruma calls the city the center of 'Japanese victim-hood,' a pilgrimage with the 'atmosphere of a religious center.' "It has martyrs, but no single god. It has prayers and it has a ready-made myth about the fall of man. Hiroshima, says a booklet entitled Hiroshima Peace Reader...'is no longer merely a Japanese city. It has become recognized throughout the world as a Mecca of world peace.'"

Hiroshima for many non-Japanese Asians occupies a similar place in the imagination as New York's Ground Zero does for many Middle-East Arabs: a talisman for selective pain. The Japanese paid into the bank of suffering with the atomic bombing of the city and they've been withdrawing heavily ever since, whitewashing the suffering they inflicted on others in their schools, history books and popular culture.

When the Dome was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996, the U.S. and China objected. America said it was "concerned about the lack of historical perspective" in the nomination. China worried that people who deny the facts of history might "utilized the Dome for harmful purposes."

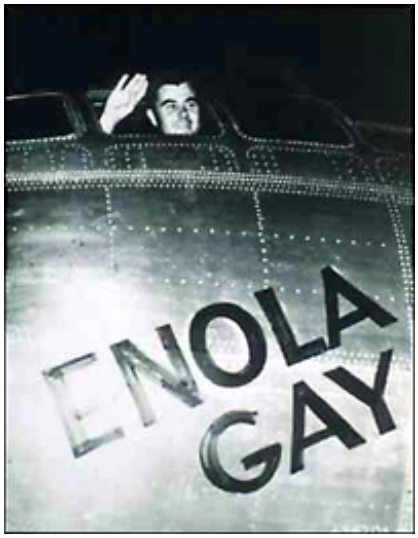
Official Hiroshima defends against these claims ritually: "We don't intend to play up our victim-hood," says Hataguchi Minoru, Director of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. "But I appreciate it must seem that way to others. We make efforts here to show what Japan did to other Asian countries."

But for ordinary hibakusha, the criticisms are felt personally. "I know what we did to others," says Yamaoka.

"I've been to Hawaii, Korea, China, Okinawa and the U.S. and seen for my own eyes what we did so now I can say now what I like. I criticize all governments, including Japan and America. I tell children to come to Hiroshima and see what war means.

"I knew nothing at the time, but that is how we were educated. We were told until the day the bomb fell that we were winning the war. Every day we were told: Die for your country! That's the terrible power of education, so I ask teachers to tell children more about the war to avoid making the same mistakes. I fear people will forget."
"Never Been More Fearful of a Nuclear Detonation"

In March this year, Paul Tibbets, the pilot of the Enola Gay plane that dropped the 'Little Boy' on Hiroshima was asked again whether he had any regrets. "Hell no, no second thoughts. If you give me the same circumstances, hell yeah, I'd do it again."



Col. Paul W. Tibbets, Jr., pilot of the Enola Gay, waves from the cockpit of the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb in history.
U.S. National Archive

But a mea culpa of sorts came in May from his former colleague Robert McNamara, the ex-U.S. Defense Secretary (1960-68) who, as a statistical control officer for the U.S. Air Force helped plan the fire bombings of 64 Japanese cities that proceeded Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In an essay for Foreign Policy magazine titled "Apocalypse Soon," he called the nuclear legacy of Hiroshima "so bizarre as to be beyond belief."

"To declare war requires an act of congress, but to launch a nuclear holocaust requires 20 minutes' deliberation by the president and his advisors. But that is what we have lived with for 40 years...I have never been more fearful of a nuclear detonation than now," wrote the man who came within a 'hair's breath' of sparking nuclear annihilation during the Cuba Missile Crisis of 1962.

Sixty years after the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the U.S. has about 8,000 'active or operational' warheads, each on average carrying 20 times the destructive power of Hiroshima. The other established nuclear powers of Russia, China, France and Britain have been joined by Israel, Pakistan and India. Iran and North Korea flirt with the nuclear club; politicians in South Korea, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, even Japan, hint that they may one day join too.

In 2003, the Armed Services Committee of the U.S. Senate backed the development of so-called 'usable' nuclear weapons, about one-third the size of the Hiroshima bomb. The city's mayor, Tadatoshi Akiba said in 2004 that Washington was "ignoring the United Nations and international law" and had "turned its back on other nations."

The hibakusha, who thought they could stop the slide into Armageddon by showing their wounds to the world, are enraged, impotent. Many only began to open up after years of soul searching abut whether they could make a difference. "I hated America," says Hatakeyama Hiroko, who lost many of her relatives in the bombing, including her cousin. She says she remembers his blank face as his hair began to fall out, "frightened at this sign of death."
When she was invited by the UN to speak in New York two years ago, she almost didn't go. "I couldn't bear the thought of going to the U.S. But I did because I felt I needed to tell the world what had happened."

"I can't believe the world is still trying to develop nuclear weapons," says Yamaoka, who began to speak publicly after her mother died. "I really didn't want to, but I felt because she had saved me I owed it to her. She had suffered so much. It was my way of thanking her."

Numata is another survivor who did not want to remember.

"I only started speaking after I retired. It was too difficult, and even when I did sometimes people didn't understand. I once talked about my experience to some students and got letters from them afterwards saying they felt sorry for me," she says. I was angry because I didn't want sympathy -- I wanted them to know that this should never happen again."

Close to the epicenter of the blast, Kojima Kazuko's exhausted mother lay down in a cellar filled with the dead and dying victims of the bomb and gave birth. Today the child is a 60-year-old owner of a bar in Hiroshima, immortalized by anti-war poet Sadako Kurihara, who was inspired by the prospect of new life among so much death.

Kojima Kazuko.

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Kojima laughs at the idea of being a living symbol of future hope. "I never really wanted to discuss it," she says. "I never even talked about it with my son. Perhaps it is Japanese culture to not want to burden your children with your own pain. But Kurihara-san died this year and I'm almost 60, so I thought now is the time to try to do something."
She says she harbors no bitterness about the bombings. "I'm less resentful about what happened in Hiroshima than I am about America's wars today. Why don't they stop? Aren't there better ways to solve problems? The reason people go to war is because they don't understand the feelings of others."

David McNeill is a Tokyo-based journalist and a coordinator of Japan Focus. He wrote this article for Ohmy News, August 6, 2005. This slightly abbreviated version was published at Japan Focus on August 7, 2005.

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