

If Only that War Had Never Occurred

Sakue Shimohira

(Ms. Shimohira was 10 years old at the time of the bombing)

Ms. Shimohira was inside an air-raid shelter in the neighborhood of Aburagi when the atomic bomb exploded. Her mother, sister, and brother all died because of the bomb. She has worked with the Confederation of Atomic Bombing Victims, taken part in efforts to map the area around the hypocenter as it appeared prior to the atomic bombing, and participated in the movement to initiate a support law for atomic bombing survivors. From the time of her attendance at the United Nations' Second Special Session on Disarmament (SSD II) in 1982, she has worked to inform people in Japan and abroad about the realities of the atomic bombings.

In the Air-Raid Shelter

I experienced the atomic bombing while in an air-raid shelter in the neighborhood of Aburagi, which was 800 meters from the hypocenter. I was ten years old and a fifth-year student at national school (which is what elementary schools were called in those days). Each time a warning alarm or an air-raid alarm was issued, I would evacuate to Aburagi's largest air-raid shelter, which was 500 meters from my house. My eight-year-old younger sister, a third-grade elementary-school student, and my older sister's one and-a-half year-old son would always come with me.

Following the aerial attack of August 1, 1945, air-raid warnings were issued on almost a daily basis, meaning that we were spending most of our time inside the shelter. When I returned home in the evening on August 8, it was the first time I had been back in a while. That night everyone in my family was able to get together for dinner, except for my father, a civilian army employee positioned in Isahaya. He would get up at 4 a.m. and never came back home until after 10 p.m. The next morning an air-raid alarm sounded, but I purposefully dillydallied around the house because I didn't want to leave my mother's side. We finally left when she grew impatient and said, "Hurry off to the shelter because there's danger in the air today." My mother herself remained at home, preparing for the air raid by drawing water and taking down the storm windows. I put on my air-raid hood and evacuated to the shelter as usual, accompanied by my eight-year-old sister and my year-and-a-half-old niece. Not knowing that this was the last time I would see my mother alive, I waved and called out "We'll be on our way now." That was at around eight o'clock.

Upon reaching the shelter, I took off my hood and rested for a while, during which time the alarm was lifted. The boys started shouting when that happened and dashed outside to play. My sister, my nephew and I were still inside the shelter at the moment that must have been 11:02. I don't remember anything except for the flash of light. By being at the back of the shelter, I was able to avoid radiation exposure, but at the moment of the flash everything went black before my eyes and I lost consciousness. I don't know how much time passed like that,

but a little while later someone shook me awake. What I saw then were the forms of people that can only be only described as grotesque. People whose bodies were pierced with shards of glass were pouring in through the entrance of the shelter in an endless procession. They had been burned so badly that it was impossible to distinguish one person from another, and their shredded clothing left them almost naked.

The sound of a voice calling "Mommy, mommy, help me!" reminded me of my own mother, and I couldn't stop myself from screaming out "Mom, Mom!" More and more time passed by, but no one from my home appeared. What on earth had happened outside the shelter? Despite being a mere child, I could sense that it had been something horrible.

The air in the shelter grew fouler and fouler, until I felt as if I was suffocating. Then, when evening came around, I heard a voice at the entrance of the shelter and thought "Ahh, now Dad is here!" My sister and I both broke into tears and wailed loudly.

"I'm glad I found you," he said. "You'd die if you stayed in a place like this much longer. Come on, we're getting out of here."

There were piles of corpses outside the shelter and those who hadn't been able to make it inside were lying on the ground moaning. There were all kinds of people with horrible burns and skin hanging off in strips.

"Step over the dead people," my father said. "Make sure you don't tread on them."

The Deaths of my Mother and Sister

Having found out that my mother and my older sister were not with us, my father led us toward our home in the hope of finding them there. Our neighborhood was surrounded by flames and the whole area was a sea of fire. We found my mother, but her body was a scorched-black corpse. The body of my sister, however, remained in relatively good condition and her face was remarkably free of burns. Two days later we cried as we gathered around the scorched and blackened body of my mother. We piled up pieces of unburned wood collected from the wasteland and placed the bodies of my mother and sister on top of them for cremation. Other cremations were taking place all around us, close by and off into the distance.

The Deaths of my Two Brothers

My eldest brother was a Kamikaze pilot who died in battle off in the Philippines. After the war he came home in a plain wood box. My second eldest brother was a medical student who died in the evening four days after the bombing. He hadn't suffered any visible wounds, but he bled from the mouth and gums, had diarrhea and vomited up some yellowish substance. Why on earth had our families suddenly been taken away from us like this- killed in atomic bombings and off on the battlefields? It was because of the war. The more I thought "If it hadn't been for that war..." the more infuriated I became.

Reunited with my Father in the Spring of 1946

We three children were then separated and brought up in different households, but in the spring of 1946 we once again moved in with my father. As no food was available, we would go up into the hills and pick things like pigweed and wild green onions, which we managed to live on. Those of us who had survived then gathered the ashes of the unidentified victims and held a memorial service in their honor.

We struggled in our daily lives, eventually managing to erect a small but habitable shack in the scorched wasteland. The sister of mine who had been eight years old at the time of the bombing became a third-year high school student, at which time she underwent an operation for appendicitis. Afterwards, however, the cut where the incision had been made wouldn't heal over, probably because her white blood cell count had gone down as a result of the atomic bombing, and started giving off a foul odor that she grew anxious about. Her life then ended at the young age of nineteen. After fretting and fretting about her condition, she committed suicide by throwing herself on the railroad tracks. I regret that I didn't realize the extent of her anxiety, and wasn't able to provide her with any sisterly advice or do anything to help her regain her strength.

Speaking out about my Bombing Experiences

It was ten years ago that I started speaking out about my atomic bombing experiences. I may have been influenced by the actions of my father, who was a chairman of the Atomic Bomb Victims' Association. It was the sense of duty I felt to those killed by the bomb that led me to start talking about that sad and miserable atomic bombing, which I would rather not even recollect on. We must not allow these efforts to speak out to come to an end, as there are still many, many people who do not know the true facts about what happened in the atomic bombings. The impact that is made when ten people speak one word each is far greater than that made by one person speaking ten words, even though the amount spoken is the same. Let's work together to preserve peace. We must ensure that these tragedies are not forgotten over time, and that the 21st century is an era of peace on a green earth.