

The Experiences of my Family in the Atomic Bombing

By Sachiko Yasui

Ms. Yasui was a girl of six at time of the bombing

The Post-War Period Was Bleaker Than I Anything I Could Have Imagined

At 11:02 on August 9, 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. This was a bomb that afflicted damage the severity and scale of which had never been seen in human history. It left an impression on me unlike anything else in my life, and the horror is still scorched in my mind to the extent that even now, fifty years later, I can still envision the events of that time with startling clarity. I will attempt to write about not only the obvious physical suffering caused by the bomb, but also the instantaneous extermination of all living things, the tragic breakdown of family systems, the destruction of the city itself, and the scars that such an enormous shock left on our hearts.

I believe that the Nagasaki atomic bombing is a lesson that was left behind for all humanity, to ensure that such a catastrophe is never repeated. If we do not learn from this lesson of the past, how can we live in peace in the present nuclear era? I believe that this is a serious issue that all of us survivors must work to address.

The event in question happened on the morning of a day when the mid-summer sun was beating down, while five of us children were playing house together. We had returned to our neighbourhood of Mezame-machi after the lifting of an air-raid alarm, and were laying out our mats on the road in front of the house two doors down from mine. These times between air raids were always fun for us, and the time seemed to pass by peacefully. The oldest girl among us, a ten-year-old who was playing mother, heard airplane engines and immediately spoke up, saying, "It's an enemy air raid, everybody. Get down on the ground!" Of course, we didn't have a clue that this was the B29 Bomber ("Bockscar") that carried the atomic bomb, and all five of us simply grouped ourselves together and got down on the ground like we did in our practice drills.

It was in the next instant that it happened. There was an eerie flash of brightness that looked like an overlapping of suns, and then a violent blast assaulted us. This was

followed by a droning sound, and for an instant it felt like my body was floating in the air. I couldn't see anything at all, and in that brief period of time all five of us found ourselves buried alive.

I found myself trapped under the debris of the houses, and when I tried to breathe dirt came pouring into my nose and mouth with the force of water flowing from a hose. At the same time I heard two of the girls start to scream.

One called out "Mother! Help me!" while the other, the 10-year-old, shouted back, "Hold on until our mothers come and save us!"

I then tried to hold my breath so I wouldn't inhale any more dirt, but after doing that I couldn't hear anything else that was said. I have no idea how much time passed, but eventually I was pulled out from under the debris. By that time the fires were already moving in on us.

My head was throbbing with pain as my mother shook my body and asked, "Are the other children here as well?"

I still wasn't able to talk, but I nodded my head in consent. My uncle, who was standing nearby, said "Don't move from here" and then went off to continue his frantic search for the other four children.

After they dug out the other four, we all fled to the top of the nearby mountain. Because I was crying the whole time, I have no idea where we walked or how we got to our destination. The adults carried the bodies of the other four children, for they had suffocated to death after swallowing so much dirt. I couldn't see anything except the flames of burning houses and the outline of the destroyed city. I was only six years old at the time, and for me that was the first time I had ever looked down on the city from a location that high. Nagasaki had become the embodiment of an atomic hell, but as horrible as that was, that was only the beginning of the tragedy. The sun shone down on the ruined lives of those in Nagasaki who had been so healthy just a short while earlier.

The wounded came up the same mountain one after another, fighting the pain in their bodies to make it to the top. Among them were people with scorched skin, and some whose skin hung down in strips. The state of panic on the mountain grew extreme as more and more people gathered there. There were screams of "Give me water!" and "Someone help me!" Others called out the names of their family members, or wandered around vacantly before taking their last breaths and falling down on the ground or into ponds of water.

I had been trembling with fear the whole time, and it wasn't until we came to the foot of the mountain that I finally felt safe. My oldest brother, who was fourteen years

old at the time, had suffered burns over half of the right side of his upper back. We had also come across my other older brother, who was ten, on our way up the mountain, meeting him as he was frantically running back down after having witnessed the sky suddenly go dark. He told his older brother how happy he was to be saved, not knowing that his body had been showered with an extremely high dose of radiation. My younger brother had been hit on the back of the head by a large piece of broken wood and became trapped under the debris of our house when it collapsed, dying before we found him. My younger sister still seemed to be in fair condition at that point, but the city of Nagasaki had turned into a sea of flames, and a black rain had started to fall.

One of the people in the group that we had evacuated with said bewilderedly, "Could the Americans be dropping oil on us now?"

It hadn't been oil, raindrops that had black specks attached to them. A concentrated dose of radioactive material probably fell over the entire district at that time. Large numbers of people gathered at the nearby reservoir because their burns had made them so thirsty that all they could think about was finding water to drink.

My father had been away that morning, off visiting one of his sick coworkers in the neighbourhood around Glover Garden. Seeing the unprecedented tragedy that had fallen on the city made him so worried about his family that he hiked back over the mountains to search for us and kept looking until he found us at just before twilight. All through the surrounding woods and fields he had come across the bodies of the dead. He kept yelling out "Is anyone all right here?" but no one was able to answer him.

After the fall of night he reached the evacuation site at the international cemetery, which was overflowing with those who had managed to flee. The voices of those moaning out desperately for water formed an endless chorus. Most people had lost all ability to reason and without any idea what to do they just stared vacantly at the scene before them. Worry and fear escalated to an even greater level. My second-oldest brother had always been the energetic one in our family, but now even he started vomiting. My oldest brother came down with a fever due to the pain from his burns and the injury to his leg. I completely lost my appetite at this time and didn't sleep at all, staying up all through the night fully aware that my body had become oddly weakened.

On August 10, before the sun had risen, my father took the dead body of my younger brother and buried it in a nearby cemetery. He placed a single piece of clothing over my brother's face, and then hastily buried the body with those of our relatives' children.

At the very end, my mother pressed his body against her chest, saying to him, "I'm

sorry I couldn't do anything to save you. Please forgive me."

She gave him every ounce of maternal love in her body at that point. In the skies overhead an American reconnaissance plane circled.

Later that night we (the four surviving children) were taken four kilometers away to Michinoh Station, our feet wrapped in old rags because we didn't have any shoes. On the night of the tenth we reached the road that would take us out to (the neighbouring city of) Shimabara. People were fleeing in droves to try to catch the emergency trains. Passing through the perilous inferno was like taking a journey through fear itself, our route taking us through a blackened wasteland covered with scorched bodies. My mother held my hand and carried my little sister on her back, while my father carried my oldest brother and my other older brother battled harsh nausea as he walked on his own. It was just before sunset on the evening of August 11 when we reached Michinoh Station.

The bodies of those who had died after reaching the station lay among the multitudes of evacuated people. There were also others who held out their arms and shrieked endlessly, crying out, "Someone help me!" or "Bring me some water!"

Another sorrowful sight was seeing those who were in so much anguish that they screamed, "Please kill me!" pleading for death instead of life.

During the whole time we were making this trek (to the station) I never once saw another living child.

After arriving at Shimabara Station, my second-oldest brother's condition took a turn for the worse, and at that point we carried him over to a hospital. My other brother, my little sister and I were taken to stay with farming relatives of ours who lived at the foot of the north face of Mt. Unzen, five kilometers away from the train station. The people living in that area were very considerate to us because they could see that we had suffered badly and didn't even have any clothes. They fretted over us from morning to night, telling us things like, "You should drink the tea of boiled persimmon leaves," or "You should eat lots of green vegetables."

Unfortunately, however, our bodies weren't yet ready for food or drink, and our vomiting and fatigue continued. Our parents thought that the clean mountain air would help us regain our health, an assumption based on the knowledge what they had experienced in their own lives. This, however, was the first time human beings had experienced an atomic bombing and nothing anyone tried led to recovery. While we were going through this period of trial and error my mother and father also came down with

health problems that left them in as much need of care as we children were. When things had gotten to that point, what on earth could be done? That question went unanswered and time simply passed by. There simply wasn't a single person who knew that the symptoms we were experiencing had been caused by the radiation of the atomic bomb.

Although my oldest brother battled bravely in his hospital room, his hair began falling out and his high fever persisted. His condition then worsened to the point where he couldn't even drink down a single tea spoon of water. It was during the time when my parents and I were going back and forth between the hospital and the mountainside that my second-oldest brother lost all his strength and passed away. That was on the night of August 20.

Just before he died he called me by name, saying "Good-bye, Sachiko. You'll have to take over for me" as he took his last breaths. Too sad to muster up my own "Good-bye", I simply felt the sorrow of our final parting. We put his body on a piece of wood that was about the size of a storm door and carried it over to my relatives' house, which was about thirty minutes away. My parents, my uncle, my aunt and I all trudged along that dark country road in a silent procession, forming a picture that must have looked like misery itself.

Two or three days after that, my oldest brother's condition worsened and we took him to the hospital, putting him on the back of a horse in order to get him down the mountain. He was suffering from burns and a high fever, but he tried as hard as he could to be cheerful as we descended, even managing to joke about it being the first time he had ever had the chance to ride a horse. We hadn't told him about the death of his brother. He wasn't thinking that that would be the last day he spent on the mountainside. He wasn't able to receive proper treatment at the hospital and the burn wound on his arm grew worse, giving him great pain and swelling up in a dark-brownish colour.

He said to my parents, "I wish the pain in my arm wasn't so bad," but there was nothing they could do except fervently urge him on with words of support. His hair fell out and his high fever continued, and on the first of September he passed away.

On the verge of death he said to my father, "Father, don't cry. It is just as if I died as a *kamikaze* pilot. Wipe your tears away and sing the army song *If I Go to Sea* for my send-off."

The second and third oldest boys in our family had died, and now we were about to lose my oldest brother as well. At this point my father broke down, shedding an

enormous amount of tears. We told my brother to keep on fighting, but he responded by saying once again, "Wipe your tears away and sing the song for me."

Heeding his son's final wish, our father began singing one of the verses, at which point my brother peacefully took his last breaths. My parent's cried more tears than seemed possible, for they had lost three of their sons in less than a month. I was only six years old then, but I fell into a deep state of mourning as well. On September 4, the uncle who had pulled me out from under the debris began suffering from symptoms like pain inside his mouth (around the pharynx), high fevers, and loss of hair.

When he passed away he said, "This pain is like having a thousand needles stuck into me."

My aunt ran a high fever as well, and she passed away on September 6.

As we never had enough food during the war, we had often eaten a variety of weeds and grasses picked from the mountain fields.

My mother would simply say "Time to Eat!" and all the children would quickly assemble around the dinner tray.

Occasionally we would get rice gruel with some pumpkin or sweet potato mixed in, but we had to really dig to find the grains of rice.

There were no second helpings to be had, either, and if we held our bowls out for more our oldest brother would exclaim, "Remember that these are hard times. (If you ask for more) Mother won't have any for herself."

Our mother used to say to us, "You must be hungry now," ignoring her own hunger to make sure that we had always had enough.

Conditions kept growing more and more strained. There were tense periods when we went without sleep or rest for days on end. Our family struggled through the stress of these times, always trying to maintain positive throughout. That was something we kept up through the times of hardship during the war and even in the dark period after as well. We carried our mental distress and mutual anguish with us as the family descended down the road to breakdown, which eventually led to our demise.

After my two older brothers passed away, I grew feverish and came down with symptoms like loss of hair, bleeding from the mouth and a complete lack of appetite. On top of that, the skin of my arms and legs broke out in some kind of rash. Along with my fever, my wounds started to fester, attracting swarms of flies that laid eggs in them, something that was excruciatingly painful. There was no medicine to put on, and without any gauze, bandages or disinfectant they grew progressively worse. My father's

search for food supplies took him to a nearby farm where after a lot of pleading he managed to get part of a single bundle of dry udon noodles. My mother added mushrooms that she had gathered from the mountainside to this, and that single bowl of udon turned out to save my life.

After losing my two brothers, I returned to the mountainside, where the autumn mornings and nights were now quite chilly. In the months I spent living on the mountainside, my days were sad and desolate. I heard the news that the war was over, but the misfortune I had experienced had been so great that when I tried to go about my life normally, I couldn't figure out what to do. My parents were desperately thinking about what we could do while going through psychological anguish of their own. As a child, seeing my parents' faces like that drove me to a state of uncertainty. Feeling that they had to do something, anything, to help us, they had desperately fled with us to this place called Shimabara. Here the nature was abundant and the water was clean, but we had no time to enjoy these. We had been thrown into the world of death and destruction, and less than a month after the atomic bombing twenty-three of my relatives, including brothers and sisters, had died.

My one surviving sister and I came to depend on the love shown to us by our parents. It felt strange to have survived amidst the complete destruction all around us, but we felt that we had been granted life and knew that we had to continue looking for hope and existence. It was August of 1946 when we returned to Nagasaki, where there were still many cruel sights to be seen.

Life after the atomic bombing was misery itself. We would collect nails, steel and wood from the scorched debris and use them to build what were more like shacks than real houses. Food supplies were extremely scarce, and we put up with our hunger by picking potato vines or anything else edible that was within reach and putting it in our mouths. The atomic-bombing survivors who had been left naked didn't even have clothes that they could use to trade. On rainy days the rain would leak everywhere, and when the wind was strong it would always seem like the shacks were about to be blown over. There were a lot of nights when we were full of anxiety, for it wasn't until some years later that properly-built houses were constructed.

My little sister's condition never improved from when she had first become ill in the period immediately after the atomic bombing. In April of 1954 she came down with

leukemia due to the radiation, from which she passed away in June. My father overworked himself trying to help with post-war restoration efforts, dying of liver disease in September of 1961. In 1962 I fell ill with thyroid cancer, for which I needed two operations to escape hardship. As a result of having been saved, I began to think about what goals I wanted for my life, what possibilities I had for my future, and what I should believe in. I was unsure if I could push aside that world of death and destruction and get on with my future, and wondered if we would really be able to live healthy lives after all that. I spent my youth in this in-between period of anxiety and hardship, with sad times following one after another. On top of all that, in April of the fortieth year after the war, my mother fell ill from leukemia caused by the atomic bomb and passed away.

Having become the last survivor, I found myself sinking into deep reflection. I wasn't only thinking about how the atomic bomb had brought about tragic destruction, but also about the continuing horror it perpetuated. While this definitely included physical suffering, it also meant that the foundations for peoples' rebuilt lives were extremely fragile. Throughout all the upheaval during the postwar period, I found myself constantly revisiting those scenes of destruction. I was a survivor and after living through that severe ordeal I found myself facing uncertainty and anxiety many times, during which I came to realize the significance of life. When I thought with regret about all those who had been made victims, especially those in my own family, a single mission was born for me. Due to my overcoming the many ordeals I went through as one of the small number of humans to have survived an atomic bombing, I came to a point where I wanted to renounce nuclear weapons and contribute to the peaceful existence of humankind in a way in which I could display my own faith and convictions.

Whenever I think back with regret about all those who wanted to live out their lives but were unable to, I remember the words, "Instead of gazing up at heaven to pray, bend down to the ground and hear the eternal scream." What thoughts were all those people thinking at the moment they were forced to leave this world? With fifty years of emotions having welled up inside me, I look back on my own life and feel a sense of responsibility for the future. When I think about the knowledge I have gained about both the extreme suffering of humanity and also human love, I, a person who has survived a brush with death, feel that it is my mission to tell every last person I can about the lessons of the atomic bombing and make pleas for everlasting peace. Remembering those days, I know that the tranquil and healthy lives we live nowadays

have not come as a matter of fact, but rather have been built up on top of a history of pain. I always think of that and hold mercy and deep gratitude in my heart, for that is where true human nature resides. For the sake of world peace, I hope that I will be able to keep on learning, contributing and speaking out to others.