

# **Unforgettable Event That Summer**

**Chiyoko Shimotake**

### ● Life during the war

I was born in 1921 in Tonoga Village (later changed to Kake-cho, and present-day Akiota-cho), Yamagata County, Hiroshima Prefecture.

Around 1940 or 1941, I left my parents' house and took lessons in tea ceremony, flower arrangement and etiquette from a teacher of manners who was well-known for her strict instruction, at her house in Tsutsuga Village (present-day Akiota-cho) on a live-in basis. This greatly helped me in my life afterward. Several years later, after the teacher passed away, I was asked by the superintendent of education of Tsutsuga Village to fill the teacher's position and teach the students. I was able to make money from the lecture fees provided by the village.

Through this, I came to know Hisashi Kawamoto, a nephew of the chief of Tonoga Village, and married him in May 1944. Our marriage was due to a personal connection of my father, who worked for the Tonoga Village Office. After the marriage, we lived with my husband's parents (father-in-law Kamesaburo and mother-in-law Sekiyo) near the Tsurumi Bridge in Hijiyama-honmachi, Hiroshima City. Although my husband ran a watch business, he had to go out of business due to pressure to close because multiple stores of the same business type in one neighborhood weren't needed. In the difficult war situation, which dictated that two full-time housewives were not needed for a single household and that women should work too, starting next month of my marriage I went to work for the military arsenal in Kasumi-cho, where my father-in-law also worked.

### ● Before the A-bombing

My parents-in-law's hometown was also Tonoga Village. My mother-in-law was planning to visit Tonoga Village from August 3, but suddenly changed her mind that morning and told me, "You go first. I'll visit there during *Obon* and stay for about 10 days." So I went to my parents' home in Tonoga Village from August 3 to August 5. While I was crossing the Tsurumi Bridge, my mother-in-law ran after me and gave me a parasol in good condition, saying, "Leave this at your parents' home because if we keep it in Hiroshima, we're not sure what would happen to it, with the air-raids." She continued, "Say hello to your father and mother, and be sure to come back on the 5th." Those were the last words my

mother-in-law spoke. I was listening to her without the slightest idea that they would be her last words to me. When staying at my parents' home, I always wanted to be there as long as possible and relax, so decided to return home on the last bus leaving the night of the 5th. But when I tried to return home, I was refused entry to the bus and had to go back to my parents' home. Learning that I hadn't returned home, my father scolded me, saying, "Someone who can't keep her word is a failure. I can't apologize enough to Mr. and Mrs. Kawamoto for your lie!" He also sent the Kawamoto's a telegram conveying the message, "I will make sure Chiyoko returns home tomorrow by all means."

### ● From August 6 to August 9

The next day (August 6), I still lingered at my parents' home despite the fact that it was already past the day I promised and that I should have left early in the morning. If I had left there early in the morning, though, I would have experienced the A-bombing at a place much closer to ground zero. Then, 8:15 a.m. came. After a sensation of something flashing, there came a boom like the rumbling of the Earth. Over time, countless pieces of torn or scorched paper with words "Hiroshima City" in Japanese came drifting through the air. Seeing these, I thought something happened in Hiroshima. After a while, we were informed that something very serious did seem to have happened in Hiroshima. I tried to return to Hiroshima, but people said that the route to the city was in no condition for women and children to be able to walk along. So my father went to Hiroshima City on foot to check things out first. According to him, he first reached a house in Hijiyama-honmachi where we lived and saw everything burned down. In the ruins of a fire, he found a message board that read, "We are at a dormitory in the arsenal." He went there and met my husband and parents-in-law. My mother-in-law was suffering from serious burns and was already at death's door. After checking the conditions of my husband and parents-in-law, my father went to check on my uncle in Higashi-Hakushima-cho. With his house having been completely collapsed, my uncle evacuated to the area around Koi. My cousin, who was engaged in building demolition operations under the student mobilization, was dead.

After walking about checking the area, my father returned to Tonoga Village. Informed that my family including my husband were at a

dormitory in the arsenal, I entered Hiroshima on the morning of August 8 by changing from a bus to a train (Kabe Line). On my way there, there were many injured people who were breathing feebly, laid out in a plaza in front of Kabe Station. Each of them had only one can by their bedside. Even when people who came to find their families peeped into the victims' faces, calling the names of their loved ones, none of them was vigorous enough to answer. Seeing many injured persons, I became terribly worried about my own family

My train stopped around the area of Mitaki Station, and the passengers were asked to get off. From that point I headed toward the arsenal dormitory, carrying foods such as pickled plums and rice that I had received from my parents. However, I didn't know which direction I should go over the expanse of burned plain. I had to walk around without any of the landmarks I previously expected to find. Then I saw a fire. Assuming someone would be there, I came near the fire to ask my way and found that the fire was being used for cremating corpses. Be it on a bridge, on the side of a street or in a rice field, corpses were being cremated just about anywhere. Even when seeing the corpses being cremated, I felt nothing or thought nothing of the smell. My feelings must have been paralyzed.

Late at night on the 9th, at 3:00 a.m., I finally reached the arsenal dormitory. Although my mother-in-law had already died, her body was still lying nearby because it was only a few hours after her death. Since my mother-in-law was in a crop field at the time of the A-bombing, she was in a horrible condition, suffering burns all over her body, with her chin and breasts completely burned. According to my father-in-law, he lit some candles when he couldn't hear her groan anymore and found that she had passed away. The next day, my father-in-law built a wooden box, put my mother-in-law in it, and cremated the box in a potato field.

### ● **My husband's death**

Since my husband was at home, he didn't suffer any burns or visible injuries. He told me that hearing my mother-in-law's screams while she was working in the field, he went outside to rescue her.

On August 15, I woke up at 5:00 a.m. Although my husband told me that I didn't have to get up so early, I made dumplings to offer to my mother-in-law's spirit because it was the seventh day after her death—the

day we were supposed to hold a memorial service. I also prepared rice porridge for the three of us. When I tried to feed the rice porridge to my husband, who was lying on the floor with my father-in-law in a three-tatami-mat room, he didn't respond. He had passed away before my father-in-law even realized it. Since flies were now swarming to my husband's body, in order to cremate it as soon as possible I reported to the local government office that my husband had died on the 14th (even though he had actually died on the 15th), and cremated his body on the day he died. My father-in-law built a wooden box again, this time for my husband. We put my husband in the box and cremated it. Since setting the fire for my mother-in-law's cremation seemed to have been very difficult for my father-in-law to bear, he asked me to take that role in cremating my husband. I also had a strong reluctance to setting fire to someone who was breathing just that morning, but it was my responsibility and I lit the fire. But I couldn't stay there once the body began burning. I tried to leave, only to learn that I couldn't stand up, with my feet tottering. So I had no choice but to crawl home. With corpses being cremated here and there, I suffered burns on my palms, knees and feet from crawling on the still-hot ground.

The next day, I went out to pick up my husband's bones and wondered why a red alert siren hadn't gone off with enemy planes flying just overhead. I didn't find out till later that the war had already ended.

### ● **Cyanide for committing suicide**

At the arsenal, all the women had received cyanide. We were told to take it in case we were raped by American soldiers, which was a shame to Japanese. When my husband died, I tried to take the cyanide, feeling like I was useless. While my father-in-law went out to report my husband's death to the local government office, I even drank water to take the cyanide. But at that moment, the thought flitted through my mind of what my father-in-law would think if he found on returning home that I was also dead. So I decided not to take the cyanide, thinking that dying was not my option and that I had a duty to take care of my father-in-law. I cut my long hair and cremated it with my husband's body, talking to my husband's spirit, "I'm sorry, my dear. I can't go there with you. This is my feeling for you." If it had not been for my father-in-law, I would have taken the cyanide.

After returning to Tonoga Village, I still treasured the cyanide. One of

my brothers found it and burned it, saying that I might commit suicide if I kept it handy. I had no words to describe the smell of the chemical burning.

### ● **My father-in-law's death**

My father-in-law experienced the A-bombing while he was at the arsenal and suffered serious burns on his back. That's why he always had to lie face-down when sleeping. After my husband's death, I was planning to go to Tonoga Village with my father-in-law. But on August 25, he passed away. I was only 24 years old and suddenly all alone in Hiroshima, having lost my husband and both parents-in-law. I thought I was prepared to die. But I couldn't, filled with a sense of duty that I was responsible for bringing the ashes of the three of them to my parents-in-law's hometown and delivering them to the family there.

### ● **Returning to Tonoga Village**

I finally returned to Tonoga Village on September 6, bringing the ashes of my husband and parents-in-law with me. My husband's relatives held a funeral for my family at their home. Since I was very skinny and feeling under the weather in those days, all of my parents and brothers were there to protect me. I am still alive today thanks to them. Having parents and brothers is always a great thing. Their appetite for food was so contagious that I could eat as well. At a time when we were always short of food, I would force myself to eat even when I didn't really want to, out of a feeling that eating nothing would be detrimental. I think that that really helped me.

After returning to Tonoga Village, I went to Hiroshima City several times with my father. One day, a foreigner who had been a prisoner of war chased after us in the city. We were already exhausted from walking around the area, even having to wade through an area without any roads after the Makurazaki typhoon. Although we managed to escape from him by running desperately, I still can't forget the fear I felt from that memory.

### ● **Second marriage**

In 1957 I married again to a man with 3 children when his youngest child was two years old. At first, I intended to decline the marriage offer because I had never experienced child-rearing. However, once I met his

children, they were so adorable that I changed my mind and decided to marry him, thinking I could be happy raising these children with little hope of having my own.

### ● **Health status**

There have been many times when I was worried about my physical condition. Currently, I have to see all types of doctors. When I go to a local dentist to have a tooth pulled out, the dentist asks me to bring a physician with me because my blood doesn't clot normally.

In 2001, about 7 years ago, I underwent an operation for ovarian cancer. Since my cancer had spread to my intestines, it was such a major operation that as much as 50 cm of my intestines had to be removed. Ovarian cancer is a disease difficult to cure and had spread to my intestines. So, it's a wonder I could survive.

When I was suffering from ovarian cancer, I had a bitter sensation with foods. I started feeling the same lately so visited a hospital to see a doctor. At the hospital, I was diagnosed with an intestinal obstruction and had to be hospitalized.

### ● **Exposure to the A-bomb radiation**

Although I didn't suffer any burns by being directly exposed to the A-bomb radiation, flies laid eggs all over my body, including my hands, feet and back before countless maggots crawled out of my skin. It was a stabbing pain like being stung by a horsefly. I still have lots of marks those maggots left on my back then, so I don't want to go to any public bath, including hot springs.

Hospital doctors asked me what happened when they see my back. I answer them that it was due to the A-bombing. Some doctors also asked me if my back was exposed at the time of the A-bombing, but it wasn't like that.

Peace is very important. I believe that waging war is the wrong thing to do. Even when you have troubles in your home, you aren't happy. So, we should control ourselves so as not to cause any troubles.