

# I LOST MY FAMILY IN THE ATOMIC BOMBING

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(8 years old at that time)

Ms. Okumura was a third-year student at Shiroyama National Primary School when she experienced the atomic bombing in Shiroyama-machi, 800 meters from the hypocenter. Following the death of her parents and her siblings she was left all alone. Now she works at a store operated by survivors of the atomic bombing.

## **My Brother's Death in the War**

I experienced the atomic bombing in Shiroyama-machi, 800 meters from the hypocenter. I was eight years old at the time. On that day eight members of my family disappeared from the earth. Shiroyama had no large factories and was nestled among green foothills far back from both the railroad station and the port. The area had thus been considered relatively safe, which was why so many people had evacuated there.

In those days, Shiroyama-machi was very quiet, with a municipal housing block near Shiroyama National Primary School and rice paddies patched among the foothills extending westwards. My neighborhood was a small hamlet consisting of about a dozen houses. It was an idyllic community where we would shout out greetings to the adults and they would cheerfully call back "Hi!"

When the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki at 11:02 on August 8, however, much of this hamlet, including its people and houses, instantly vaporized. The atomic bomb exploded 500 meters over Matsuyama-machi, only 800 meters from here. An intense flash and ear-shattering explosion, followed by the ferocious heat ray and blast, completely destroyed the Urakami district and turned it into an inferno.

On the morning of August 9th, my father and my brother went to work. Then an air-raid siren sounded, so I evacuated to the air-raid shelter with my mother and my siblings. Soon after the air-raid alarm was lifted, my mother and my siblings went home. I went over to the home of a friend of mine who lived on a hill a little way away from my house, where we played together under a big persimmon tree.

Oddly, I didn't hear the explosion or see the atomic cloud, even though we were fairly close to the hypocenter. In retrospect, I think that I must have instinctively dropped to the ground at the moment of the incredible blast. When I regained my senses, I noticed that my friend was nowhere near. She had probably been thrown somewhere by the force of the blast.

My friend's house had been destroyed. Panicking, I hurried down the long stone staircase that led to my home. On the way over I had passed homes and fields, but now there wasn't a

single house standing.

The things I saw on the way back made me cry. My aunt's house was gone, the Moriyama's horse was dead and many people had been killed. Our house, only recently constructed, had been so completely demolished that not a trace of it remained. There was no sign of my mother or brother, either, although they should have been at home at that time.

Being just a third-grade student at elementary school, it was impossible for me to fathom what had happened. But I remembered the local bomb shelter and headed off for it. Right away I met up with my four-year-old brother. He had suffered burns and was crying. There was nothing I could do for him, so I told him I would go and fetch our mother. Then I left him there and headed back up the road I had just come down. On the way a neighbor called out to tell me that my younger sister was lying under a kumquat tree. I hurried over to her and found that her face, previously bright and cheerful, was so swollen that she looked completely different. As I wasn't able to move her, there was really nothing I could do.

I knew that the most important thing was to find my mother. I went to the places where I thought she might be, like the fields where she helped out with the farming work, but I didn't come across her. I spent the night of August 9th in the air-raid shelter with my brother and my neighbors. People from other families were rejoicing, happy to be reunited with each other, and saying things like, "It's so good to see you survived!" and "After all that, you still look well!" I kept waiting for my mother and father to return, but they never did. None of my siblings came back either.

Before we had our own house built, we lived in a rented unit on my aunt's property. Apparently this aunt had been out weeding the fields near Shiroyama Elementary School when the atomic bomb was dropped and when she came back home she had burns all over her body. She may have been seriously injured when she got back home, but at least all six of her family members were able to see each other again. If I could have met my parents and siblings again, even just one last time, it would have made me feel so much better. It wouldn't have mattered to me what injuries they had or what they looked like. But none of them ever came back.

I remember what happened up until that point, but from then on my memory is a blank. Maybe it was the shock of the atomic bombing, or maybe it was the misery I felt at losing everyone in my family except my little brother; whatever the reason, I came down with amnesia. Apparently I went to live with my aunt and cousins, but I have no recollection of that whatsoever. Fifteen years later, I met up with my cousins again and they told me about what happened at that time. They said that when my seriously wounded aunt finally passed away I refused to leave her side, crying over and over, "No, auntie, don't go!"

After my aunt passed away, my brother and I were taken away again, this time to live with distant relatives we had never met before. My memory comes back at the point when we left

for the countryside, probably because of how upset I felt about leaving Nagasaki. I remember feeling sad and anxious as my brother and I were taken out to the countryside, first crossing the Urakami River at Ohashi Bridge. Around Shiroyama Elementary School (I saw) that the municipal housing had all been destroyed, leaving nothing but roads. Blackened corpses were lying on the ground. The Urakami River, where the children had gone to swim and fish, was now filled with the corpses of those who had gone there searching for water after being scorched in the bombings.

My memory of the atomic bombing hadn't come back, even after being taken away from my relatives, and I started to believe that I would find my mother and the rest of my family if I went back to Shiroyama. It took three hours to get there from the countryside, but time and time again I tottered off in search of my parents. When I reached Shiroyama I would always be found and taken back home.

After a while I gave up on these trips to Shiroyama, and devoted all my time to taking my brother, who had suffered horrible burns, to the hospital instead. I was too small to carry him on my back, so I took him by the hand and we slowly walked over together. If our mother had been there, she would have carried him and given him her full attention when he complained about the pain. As it was, however, he could only put up with the pain all over his four-year-old body as we went back and forth to the hospital. He died on October 23, two months after the atomic bombing, taking with him nothing but his hellish suffering. All I could think was that if he hadn't had any chance of survival, it would have been better if he had been killed instantly. The image of my brother silently enduring his pain has been imprinted on my eyelids ever since.

Because I was playing outside that day, I undoubtedly was exposed to a significant amount of radiation. Later, I suffered from hair loss and bleeding gums and I felt tired and sick all over. I was never taken to the hospital, though, because we didn't know anything about radiation illnesses at that time. There is no way I can express how sad and frustrating it was not to have my parents with me and not to have anyone to talk to about the pain I was feeling. Furthermore, it was hard for me to get used to life in the countryside. The atomic bomb had changed my life.

For 46 years I ran away from my atomic bombing experiences, unable to speak a word about them to anyone. I had a desire to leave behind a written account of my family, however, and when the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Victims Association was putting together a volume of survivors' accounts titled *Asu e no Isan (A Legacy for Tomorrow)*, I made a one-page contribution. Then I met a friend of my sister's who told me things that I about my family, my sister in particular, that I had never heard before, bringing the misery of the atomic bombing back again. This time I felt that I was ready to face it head on, however, and I gradually got myself to the point where I could talk about my experiences in those days to groups of students visiting Nagasaki.

I learned that my father had passed away up on the mountainside. My mother, whom I had spent so long searching for, had actually been trapped under the debris of our collapsed house and died there with her arms held protectively around my two-year-old brother. She hadn't died instantly, but without anyone around to help her she had stayed there until she drew her last breath.

I never did find out what happened to my missing older brother. Forty years have gone by, but even now I still try to tell myself that he isn't dead.

Each month, on the anniversary of their deaths, I used to walk alone from the countryside to the cemetery in Shiroyama. I would always wait for my brother, thinking that I might meet him there if I did. Every time I saw the (family) name Tokunaga in the newspaper or on a sign, I would search for his name underneath it. I felt as if my brother was there providing support for me.

One day I knew for the first time in 46 years that there was a memorial service held by former Mitsubishi Arms Factory. My father and my brother were working there. I attended the memorial service and searched for their names. I could find my father's name there but not my brother's name. Even now I'm not sure whether he died or not.

Each member of my family died in various locations here and there. Furthermore, they died in a nearly naked condition with their clothes almost burned, there were no means to identify their ashes. I collected the dirt of the locations on which my family might have died and I put them with the new shirts into the grave of Tokunaga situated in Shiroyama-machi. It seemed to me they could gather together at last and sleep in peace under this grave.