

In the Words of an Atomic Bomb Survivor

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The atomic bomb exploded 500 meters from the ground and wreaked havoc on the city below. Almost everyone outdoors within a radius of one kilometer from the hypocenter died instantly. It is estimated that by the end of the year, 74,000 people had died and 75,000 suffered injuries, but the exact figures will never be known.

Most buildings within a radius of 2.5 kilometers were totally demolished and then consumed in the fires that spread throughout the northern part of the city.

Aside from the sheer destructive might, the major difference between nuclear and conventional weapons is that the former generate radioactive rays. People exposed to atomic bomb radiation suffered symptoms such as the falling out of hair and bleeding from the gums and died one after another. It has been confirmed since then that several types of cancer occur more frequently in exposed than in non-exposed persons, a fact that causes persistent anxiety for the atomic bomb survivors.

Ms. Shimohira Sakue was ten years old at the time of the bombing. She lost her mother, older sister and younger brother in the bombing, and her younger sister committed suicide in the midst of illness and poverty after the war. Ms. Shimohira only survived the explosion because she stayed behind in an air-raid shelter to take care of her eight year-old sister and cousin. The air-raid shelter was located in Aburagi-machi, only about one kilometer from the hypocenter. The following is a translation of Ms. Shimohira's verbal account of her experience.

The next day we decided to leave the shelter and to go off in search of our mother and older sister, but the city was so devastated that we could not even tell where our house had been. All that was left was a field of rubble scattered with blackened corpses. We crossed Shimo-Ohashi bridge across Urakami River, but there were no landmarks left to show the way to our former neighborhood.

On the other side of Shimo-Ohashi bridge I saw a large number of people at the banks of the river. They were scorched black and struggling to get a sip of water, but many most of them died right there on the bank. Hundreds of dead bodies were caught on the rocks in the river.

When we finally found the ruins of our house, we dug through the rubble until we found a corpse burnt beyond recognition. The hands were still covering the eyes, with the thumbs plugging the ears. Because the skin underneath was intact, we found when we pulled away the hands that it was our older sister. After that we gathered debris from the ruins of the house and used it to cremate the body. No matter how hard we searched, though, we couldn't find our mother in the rubble. Finally we checked two bodies lying out on the street, and we identified one as our mother by her capped tooth.

We had no container for the ashes after the cremations, so we used a blackened kitchen pot to hold the remains of both my mother and sister. Carrying this, the three of us trudged back to the air-raid shelter.

That evening my older brother arrived at the air-raid shelter from the medical college. He had suffered no injuries or burns and so we all rejoiced together. But soon he began to spit out huge amounts of a yellow liquid. He died later crying that he wanted to stay alive.

He had suffered no external injuries but had probably been exposed to radiation at the time of the bombing and then to residual radiation during his walk back from school to the air-raid shelter. That is why he vomited a yellow liquid and died.

Our next door neighbor Mrs. Matsuda came to the air-raid shelter carrying her baby. She had suffered terrible injuries. The baby was dead, but she insisted on holding it and refused to go into the shelter. We had her lie down outside in the rubble. To prevent her detection by enemy airplanes we climbed up to the top of Mt. Iwaya and gathered tree branches, then used these to make a tent. The rest of us fled into the air-raid shelter every time we heard an airplane engine. Later, Mrs. Matsuda's son Seiji, a student at Keiho Middle School, came along, but his mother was so changed that he refused to believe it was her. She had a slash right across her scorched throat. She begged for water, but when we gave it to her it splashed out of the cut. Seiji did not recognize her until she called out his name. People suffered such terrible burns in the atomic bombing that their relatives could not identify them.

Both Mrs. Matsuda and her baby were black with burns. She died trying to breast feed the dead baby. Before she died she shivered and cried "It's cold! It's cold!" even though it was a sweltering August day. Seiji took off his undershirt and gave this to his mother, but soon he died as well.

Everyone we knew died in front of our eyes. My future husband's mother Mrs. Shimohira and my mother were close friends. They always spent their free time together talking or cooking. They died beside each other on the street, probably on their way to Mrs. Shimohira's house after the morning air-raid alarm was lifted.

They were so severely burned that we could not tell them apart. The flash of heat had reduced them to black crusts like lumps of charcoal.

My sister and I eventually found lodgings in an outlying village after the war, but in March 1946 we came back to Nagasaki and built a shack on the site of our former home near the hypocenter.

It had been said that no plants would grow in the hypocenter area for seventy-five years, but the following spring the ruins were full of new greenery. For lack of any other food, we collected pigweed and other wild plants and these became the staples of our diet. The occupation forces built an air strip right beside our shack. There was no electricity of course, and the shack was standing all by itself in the ruins. At night we often saw little red and blue lights in the darkness. We called these "fire balls." If we went to the spot the next day, we would find the ashes of human bodies in the rubble. We gathered these and put them in iron bathtubs that had not been broken in the bombing. In all we filled three bathtubs with ashes. This was our job ___collecting the ashes of the dead. But we could only pick up the large clumps of ashes; the fine ashes were still on the ground when the occupation forces bulldozed it and paved it over for the air strip.

After that, we began to come down with illnesses but could not understand the causes. My sister suffered constantly after the war, but we were so poor that it was all but impossible to receive treatment. When she finally did see a doctor, she was told that it was probably appendicitis. She underwent surgery and came out of the hospital, but her body was so weakened by the lack of white blood cells that the scar refused to heal. Soon it became infected and began to fester with maggots. Everyday I carefully picked out the maggots with chopsticks, but this did not stop them from breeding. They grew at a frightening rate. We had to use rags as bandages. When we took

these off, maggots would fall out. My sister gave off an offensive odor because of the maggots___an odor like rotten fish. The smell was so bad that people plugged their noses when they came near her.

Finally she despaired and decided to join her mother. When she failed to come home one evening I went out to search for her, but it was not until the next morning that I learned that she had thrown herself in front of a train at Ohashi. Before killing herself she had left her sandals and umbrella arranged neatly at the side of the tracks.

Note

Shimohira Sakue married in 1955 and was blessed with three children. But her husband, who is also a survivor, has been in and out of the hospital over the years. Ms. Shimohira is now sixty years old. She says how she was unable for many years to speak about the atomic bombing because the very recollection choked her with grief. But she feels now that it is her duty as a survivor to describe her experiences, and she has become one of Nagasaki's most outspoken proponents for nuclear disarmament.

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