

The One-Legged Torii: A Testament to Nuclear Destruction

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Sanno Shinto Shrine nestles among towering camphor trees at the edge of the former Urakami kaido, the narrow road used by Edo-Period travelers entering Nagasaki from the north through the Urakami Valley. The shrine was founded in 1652 and named after Sanno (Hie) Shinto Shrine near Kyoto because of the similarity in the terrain and the fact that both shrines were located in a place called “Sakamoto.” The two enormous camphor trees flanking the entrance to Sanno Shinto Shrine were probably planted at the time of the shrine’s foundation.

A timeworn flagstone path leads away at right angles from the road to a long flight of stone steps descending to the congested Hamaguchi-machi neighborhood one of modern Nagasaki’s most popular night entertainment areas. Sanno Shinto Shrine’s second torii arch was established at the top of the steps to inform pilgrims that they are approaching the holy precincts of the shrine. It is a scene that can be found anywhere in Japan. But this torii arch is different, just as the neighborhood around it hides a very unusual history.

On the morning of August 9, 1945, the American B29 Bockscar, carrying an atomic bomb, abandoned its original target of Kokura because of cloud cover and changed course for Nagasaki. At 11:02 a.m., the bomb exploded over the northern part of Nagasaki, yanking an enormous column of dust, smoke and debris up into the summer sky and obliterating a good one-third of the city below.

Located about 800 meters from the hypocenter, Sanno Shinto Shrine barely had time to gasp. The instantaneous flash of heat, which reached as high as 4000 degrees on the ground, vaporized the leaves and branches on the camphor trees. Then the blast, ten times greater than the fiercest hurricane, pulverized the shrine buildings and slapped down all the stone balustrades, lanterns, sculptures and gates nearby. But when the wind finally abated and the dust settled, the stunned deities of the shrine found that one of the legs of the torii arch at the top of the steps had remained miraculously upright.

Now half a century has passed since that fateful day. The hillside is lush with greenery again, Sanno Shrine has been reconstructed, and the neighborhood is a similar – albeit modernized – version of its pre-war self. Nothing in this typical urban tangle even hints at the catastrophe that occurred here in 1945.

But the ominously significant one-legged arch continues to do its delicate balancing act and to look down upon the changing city. Robbed of a leg by the world’s first experiment with nuclear war, it points silently to the uneasiness of humankind and to the precarious state of a fragile planet forced to live with the threat of nuclear destruction.

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