

Rebirth and Reassessment : The Oral Narratives of Hiroshima's A-Bomb Survivors (ヒロシマの証言：沈黙の後の再生)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE : 1945 年 8 月 6 日人類史上はじめての原子力爆弾が広島に投下された日、被爆者として生き残った人々は、その人生に大きな変化を余儀なくされた。

1960 年代に至るまで被爆による死者が出ているし、社会的差別の原因となった後遺症に悩む人々も多い。あの日以来、人々の肉体も精神も、そして国も脅え続けているときえいえるのである。

1988 年 12 月に筆者の行なった被爆者の口述調査は、被爆という事件と、それを生き抜いた人々にとって、新しい重要な意味をもつものとなるはずである。話すことは経験を再現することであり、当人にとっての残酷な体験を内包しつつも、単なる個人としての思い出話を証言集として再構築することができた。特に被爆のような劇的体験は個人の経験にとどまらず、一つの文化全体の経験の記録となる。調査の結果、個々人の人生とそれをとりまく文化の相方にとって原爆投下は一つのきっかけとなった。つまり以前のありかたは終焉をむかえ、別の新しいものはじまりがあったことが明らかとなった。その経験は被爆者たちに新しい価値や認識の方法、記憶といったそれまでと異なった人生へのアプローチを与えたのである。彼らのうちには、その悲惨をきわめる経験ゆえに、自分たちが平和の使者となりうるという自覚や真実を伝えていかねばならないという責任感とが共存している。

これは、20 人におよぶ被爆者や被爆二世の証言にもとづいた「新たな人生の始まり」の記録である。

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I want to first discuss what I experienced at the threshold of a nuclear age, the experience which has become a fundamental source of energy to help me survive the past postwar period.

So begins Sadako Kurihara's speech, one she has given many times since she experienced the atomic blast at Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945. She has spoken to schoolchildren and citizens groups, and at peace activities. Mrs. Kurihara addresses her message to governments, scientists and the military, urging them to eliminate nuclear weapons. But she also speaks to all citizens of the world, calling for an end to nuclear testing. And, at the heart of her talk, of her message, is her oral narrative: the story of who she was before the bomb dropped, what she experienced on that terrible day and who she became as a result of having lived through the first atomic bombing in human history.

Oral narratives are stories framed by a particular moment in one's life. They recount that moment, often quite vividly, because oral narratives are forms of "life review." Robert Butler in *Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged* notes that life review is an ongoing process in which the individual comes to terms with a continually changing set of life experiences: "As the past marches into review, it is surveyed, observed and reflected upon by the ego. Reconsideration of previous experiences may provide a more valid picture, giving new and significant meanings to one's life" (page 65). The oral narrative is the receptacle of the life review process, because the "telling" is crucial to the individual's understanding of the experience. As such, an oral narrative is not just a story: it is an opportunity to relive an experience. The narrative reveals not just that experience, but also the character of the speaker at the moment of the experience and at the moment of the telling. And when the experience is a dramatic one, like the bombing of Hiroshima, the oral narrative becomes a chronicle of not just one person's experience, but of a culture's experience. It becomes a chronicle of rebirth and reassessment.

The oral narratives of those who survived Hiroshima and Nagasaki

point to a rebirth and reassessment of self. Robert J. Lifton in *Death In Life* (1967) was the first to analyze the memories and responses of "hibakusha," or survivors of the atomic bombings, but Lifton was more concerned with the calamity as psychohistory, rather than with the narrative as a record of rebirth for a culture and its people. Utilizing his work as a basis, I interviewed 20 Hiroshima hibakusha, including some of their children, in December 1988; each interview lasted approximately 4 hours and covered the periods in their lives before, during and after the bomb dropped. My goal was to record the impact of a moment in history on the lives of witnesses. I wanted their narrative of the event and how it shaped their lives in the years that followed. The result is a record of cultural and personal life review. Each of those interviewed perceived the day the bomb dropped as the end of one life and the beginning of another. Quite literally it was, since the country and its people had been both physically and emotionally scarred. But their perception of having to start over is also a psychological recognition that sense of self worth comes from an identity: when the bomb dropped, the course of their lives changed; they assumed a new identity; they had new values, new perceptions and new memories. They had to integrate a whole new set of experiences into their lives and a whole new character had to unfold. The survivors I interviewed were well advanced in the life review process, for some of them had been reminiscing for over 40 years. As a result, their oral narratives clearly reveal the new identity born on Aug. 6, 1945.

All the survivors began talking about that day by offering details of their lives before the blast occurred. For each of the survivors, life had a pattern before the bomb. As children they played in the park, went to school, helped their parents at home and aspired to futures that were open to them. Akihiro Takahashi, now work director of the Enterprise Division of the Hiroshima Peace Foundation, was 14 when the bomb dropped. He remembered being athletic and dreaming of going into films: "I enjoyed playing baseball and I wanted to go into the film industry." Seikou Komatsu, a colleague of Mr. Takahashi, was 9 years old in August 1945. The years before the bomb were marked by family loss and poverty, as his parents died shortly after he

was born; his grandparents, however, provided a solid home for the young boy. In thinking about life before the bomb, Mr. Komatsu recalled many games of baseball as a child during the war; he also recalled caring for his ill grandmother. On the morning of the bombing, like so many other mornings, he had taken his grandmother to the doctor: "My grandmother who was suffering from neuralgia used to go to a special clinic at Kusatsu-cho for moxibustion treatment." She wanted to see the doctor on that day. "We took the Miyajima Line and got off at Kusatsu Station."

Adult hibakusha too spoke of patterns; their pre-planned lives, a mixture of personal and wartime goals, were already in motion. Nineteen-year-old Hiroto Kuboura enjoyed working the rails for the Japanese National Railways. Sadako Kurihara was an established poet and essayist whose works were frequently published. Mihao Ohara was also a poet and a literary critic. Tsuyako Toyonaga was a housewife raising two sons; the younger one accompanied her on daily trips to the center of Hiroshima for volunteer war work. Suzuko Numata, engaged to a soldier, worked in the Commercial Building in the center of Hiroshima. Shizuko Abe was newly married, her husband a soldier fighting in the Pacific. The adults, like the children, emphasized their clearly defined identities before the blast.

Perhaps there was a need to talk about structure before the bomb dropped, because after the event no such structure existed. Hundreds of thousands of people died when Hiroshima was bombed on Aug. 6. Survivors suffered injuries from the heat rays and the energy blast (radiation effects were not known at the time). Ninety-two percent of the city was levelled, as homes, businesses, streets and gardens were destroyed. The mountains surrounding the city blazed for five days. All those interviewed regarded the event and the days and months that followed as a slow and painful period in which they gradually realized all that had been lost.

Those hibakusha near the hypocenter (within 4 km) revealed their feelings of confusion, numbness and loss in the immediate moments after the bombing. That earlier structure that so defined their lives was now shockingly absent. They recalled wandering aimlessly, sleeping in the streets and awakening disoriented; all talked of seeing

other survivors haunting the streets of Hiroshima. "I lay for two days," said Mrs. Abe, who was badly burned and her mouth cut. Mr. Takahashi had been blown 10 meters from where he had been standing: "Then I realized I had been standing still for quite a while, watching the smoke. What happened? I asked myself in bewilderment. I could not understand the situation and in confusion I threw myself back down on the ground ... I do not know how much time passed." Mr. Kuboura recalled that "people walked like ghosts. They wanted to drink and they were crying and calling for their family and then they lay down and couldn't get up and they died."

Those hibakusha not so near the hypocenter (including Mr. Ohara and Hiroshi Hara, who entered the city on Aug. 7) recalled witnessing the aimlessness that the others had experienced; they all walked to the center of the city looking for relatives and they all saw the same thing: "I saw on the way to school that some people among the victims were walking slowly, and some who could not walk were just laying their bodies on the ground... On the Goko bridge, I saw a woman who had become insane, shouting toward the sky," recounted Mr. Hara, then 13 years old.

The emotions experienced in the ensuing minutes, hours and days were strikingly similar even for Mr. Ohara and Mr. Hara, who can be referred to as "secondary" hibakushas. All the narratives are framed by vivid recollections of sights, sounds and smells. Mrs. Abe noted, "I smelled like rotten fish." Mr. Kuboura, who lost his left eye and suffered 38 lacerations, explained, "People put up their arms like ghosts. If they put their arms down, they felt pain. Water and blood poured from their hands." Miss Numata, under the rubble of the destroyed Commercial Building, remembered that she "lost consciousness. I lost feeling because my left leg was injured. I could see the bones... I saw unconscious people. I remember the crying and the agony of injured persons." Mr. Komatsu, like all the others, noted the black rain: "... pitch black rain poured in torrents toward the northwest direction. This black rain contained dust and dirt in the air and the horrible radioactive substances... Only the black rain could put off the fire." Mrs. Toyonaga remembered hearing her child

scream, "Fire is coming ; fire is coming." All the survivors spoke of piles of dead lining the streets, blocking movement into the city. Masatoshi Sakoda could not even tell whether the living or the dead "were male or female."

While narrating the sights, the sounds and the smells of the experience, the hibakusha spoke of a variety of emotions at the time, most of which centered around death and the survivors' concerns for the safety of themselves, their family, their friends and even strangers. All the hibakusha spoke of confronting death wherever they went. Toshiko Saeki remembered trying to return to the city center (she had been 7 km outside when the bomb dropped). Like the others, she recalled the rivers were full of dead: "The river was filled with burnt wood and dead people. The bank of the river had piles of dead, so I couldn't go to the banks. I didn't have the courage to jump into the water. I couldn't swim. So I climbed on the backs of the people and I said, 'I am awfully sorry.'" Mr. Takahashi was so badly burned that he jumped into the river; he recalled the dead floating past him. Mr. Komatsu noted that there were so many dead there was no place for cremation: "So it was done in a school field. A hole was dug in the ground and bodies were put in the hole. Oil was spread over to burn the bodies."

The immediate fear for all the hibakusha was that a family member had died: children feared loss of parents, parents feared loss of children. Mr. Takahashi had met his school friend Tatsuya Yamamoto in the street outside the schoolyard. He remembered Yamamoto asking, "What will we do if our parents are dead?" Miyoko Watanabe explained that her brother went to look for their father on Mino Island off the coast of Hiroshima -- many of the dead had been taken there: "My brother went to the mountain of the dead to look for father, but there was no father. He thought my father had turned into bones, ashes. The doctor and others said to my brother, 'Your father is at the aid station.' So my brother went and found him and took him home." Nine-year-old Keisaburo Toyonaga had been in his school's mountain retreat when the bombing occurred. He returned to the center of the city on Aug. 7 to look for his mother. "We found each other on Aug. 8. I was so afraid that my mother

hadn't survived."

Such family anxiety extended from parent to child as well. Yoshito Matsushige, then a photographer for a Hiroshima newspaper, went outside his house with his camera: "A young mother was carrying a baby. I thought the baby was dead. She called and asked the baby to open its eyes. She was crying." Perhaps the anxiety over losing a child is best expressed in one of Mrs. Kurihara's poems, titled "Sachiko." Mrs. Kurihara, a mother at the time, saw the death of many children. She recalled one young schoolchild in particular: "Next to my house I saw a young woman that went to Hiroshima as a mobilized student. She didn't go back. After three days we realized she had died. Sachiko was the student. I couldn't write the poem at first. About 1947 I wrote it. I couldn't express myself because I felt so sorry for Sachiko." In the poem, she writes:

*Your mother raised you up,
And draped a new, white, flower-patterned yukata
Over the tattered uniform seared permanently to your skin
.....
Holding you still in her arms,
She broke down in uncontrollable tears.*

The atomic bomb either destroyed or scarred the family unit in Hiroshima, and that is something none of the survivors can forget.

The narratives also reflected the hibakusha's frustrations. Survivors were frustrated because they couldn't help the dying and it was too late to help the dead. They were also anxious because no one, not even doctors, could ease the pain or cure the A-bomb injuries. Adequate medical attention was impossible to obtain in the days and months following the blast. Hospitals and aid stations were destroyed. Emergency stations were set up throughout the city, but these stations were understaffed; furthermore, medical personnel understood very little about the aftereffects of an atomic bomb. In each of the narratives, hibakusha talked of searching out these aid stations, but getting there only to discover the shortage of medical supplies and the confusion of the medical personnel. Miss Numata went three days

without treatment . Eventually , doctors came from outside of Hiroshima and amputated her leg to the thigh . She recalled lying in bed, “maggots on the floor and on my face.” Mr. Komatsu had taken his grandfather to a shelter in the countryside: “As if to add to the misery, there was no medicine at all. Even mercurochrome, which we were using in those days for treatment of such cuts, was not available in our shelter . I wondered what they were going to do without anything. A person who had come with a woman brought a small basin from the corner of the shelter and urinated in it . She wet some rags and smeared the urine over her blisters, thinking that the ammonia in urine would be of some help. I can never forget the sight.”

The weeks and months drifted on. Between 130,000-140,000 people died in the first four months after the bombing of Hiroshima; statistics show that 74 percent, of those deaths occurred the day of the bombing and 89 percent, within two weeks (Shohno page 24). The death rate in the years that followed surpassed previously recorded national averages because of the aftereffects of the bomb. In addition, survivors gradually succumbed to what became known as the A-bomb disease, “a general term for the diseases caused by blast, thermal rays, and radiation” (Shohno page 24). These diseases include general malaise, headaches, anorexia, diarrhea, anemia, loss of hair and damage to the kidney and liver; scars known as keloids began to develop after the external scars disappeared. Many forms of cancer afflicted the survivors in the ensuing years.

In the midst of trying to rebuild their lives, then, hibakusha recalled having to deal with the ongoing deaths from A-bomb disease of family and friends; these deaths continued well into the 1960s. They also had to deal with their own physical deformities and ailments. Seiko Ikeda, in addition to suffering from burns, developed severe keloids which joined her neck and jaw together: “I lived worrying about the public eye.” Like many hibakusha women, Mrs. Ikeda also suffered several miscarriages before her only child came to full term: “We can not bear babies because of radioactivity.” Mamoru Nishimoto, born in 1948, remembered caring for his mother when he was in elementary school: “My mother often lay down on the bed. When she wanted to go to the toilet, I had to carry her on my back.”

Part of Mr. Takahashi's ear was blown off in the blast while some of his fingers are now stubs and his nails grow outward; his right elbow is bent at a 120 degree angle. He was in bed for a year after the bombing and has been hospitalized frequently in the last 44 years for chronic hepatitis and other A-bomb related illnesses.

The physical deformities and ailments troubling the hibakusha figured prominently in their attempts at rebuilding their lives, as these physical problems prompted social and economic discrimination that thwarted their attempts at rebuilding. In fact, according to those interviewed, many hibakusha never obtained a "survivor card" that would have provided them with free medical assistance, because that card would have branded them forever. In the early years, particularly, many people feared they could catch A-bomb disease by being around hibakusha. According to Mr. Takahashi, some public baths prohibited use by A-bomb survivors. Lack of medical knowledge regarding possible genetic defects also resulted in many divorces and the break-up of engagements. Mrs. Ikeda's relatives urged her fiancé not to marry her; Mrs. Abe's mother wrote to her husband in the Pacific telling him to divorce her because she was a hibakusha; and the family of Miss Numata's fiancé urged him to break off their engagement. Both Mrs. Ikeda's and Mrs. Abe's partners did not heed the advice of relatives. Miss Numata's fiancé committed suicide: "His parents told him I was weak and was a survivor. There are many women like this in Japan. He told me frankly his parents rejected me. After that I came to realize that I could not marry. I was not allowed to marry, if I was a survivor. I changed my attitude toward him and he killed himself by jumping into a train."

Job discrimination also thwarted the attempts by hibakusha at rebuilding their lives. "Since we are not healthy, there is job discrimination," said Miss Numata. "Only normal men could work in the railway jobs," noted Mr. Kuboura. Mr. Takahashi explained that the government was required to provide hibakusha with jobs; in many instances, that was the only place hibakusha could find work. Before he began in government posts, he tested for a job in advertising. Mr. Takahashi passed the exam and a second interview. They had discussed salary and working conditions, when suddenly he received a

letter of refusal from the company: "This was a bitter shock to me . . . the grim reality of being the victim of the bomb."

Who the hibakusha are today -- what they do for a living, what they do in their spare time and what they believe in -- is the result of the fact that they are survivors of the first atomic blast. Both Mr. Takahashi and Mr. Komatsu are now workers at the Hiroshima Peace Foundation. Mr. Sakada is the assistant director of the A-bomb Survivors Welfare Association -- his association assists hibakusha who never applied for survivor medical cards or who suffer from discrimination. Reiko Kato began to teach schoolchildren after the war: "I became a teacher to teach peace." She also served as a social worker in an A-bomb hospital recovery unit: "I listened to their agony to help them live." Mr. Ohara and Mrs. Kurahara have devoted much of their literary careers to writing about their experiences and their political views on nuclear war.

Those hibakusha whose careers don't necessarily reflect their identity as survivors nevertheless have devoted much of their spare time to speaking about their experiences and in helping other survivors live with the memories. Mrs. Abe, Miss Numata and Mr. Matsushige frequently talk to schoolchildren about their experiences; Mr. Matsushige brings with him the photos he took on Aug. 6 and on the days following. Mr. Toyonaga works with Korean survivors; these survivors, he said, suffer double discrimination, both as Koreans living in Japan and as hibakusha. Mr. Hara, who owns a flower shop, has painted several watercolors depicting his experience and his view of peace; he takes these pictures with him when he delivers talks about the atomic bomb. Photos of his paintings have been published in books, and some of his paintings hang in the Hiroshima Peace Museum. Said Miss Numata: "When I look at Mr. Hara's pictures, I remember everything I experienced when the A-bomb dropped. To communicate is very important."

All the hibakusha interviewed had definite views on peace and on nuclear weapons as a result of having been a witness at Hiroshima. All felt that it was crucial to convey those views. Their oral narratives are dotted with comments on the need for peace. As Mrs. Ikeda noted, "Survivors are responsible for telling the truth." The survivors

I interviewed all argued that nuclear weapons needed to be abolished. "Human beings can't live with nuclear war. To live peacefully in the 21st century, we must abolish nuclear weapons. I want the peace movement devoted to the abolition of nuclear weapons," said Mr. Hara. Mr. Toyonaga seemed puzzled at the proliferation of nuclear arms after the war: "After the bomb dropped, we should have reduced nuclear weapons. Now the USSR and the U.S. have many nuclear weapons and my anger increases." Whenever a country conducts a nuclear test, Mr. Sakoda and other survivors and their children stage a silent, one hour sit-in in front of the cenotaph in the Hiroshima Peace Park. In 1980, Mr. Sakoda staged 34 sit-ins. The anti-nuclear views of hibakusha stem from having experienced nuclear holocaust. People, said Mrs. Watanabe, just don't understand the danger of a nuclear event; she knows, because she experienced it: "Nuclear bombs destroy human bodies... I hope the 21st century is at peace." The creation of a peaceful world seemed very important to those survivors interviewed. Mr. Komatsu, whose calling card reads, "The Origin of Peace is The Wisdom and Conscience of Mankind," said, "We must have a world without borders ... We must work hand in hand." Both Miss Numata and Mrs. Watanabe have made peace tours around the world, and Mr. Ohara appeals for peace through his poetry. Some did not even express hatred toward America for having dropped the bomb, but all felt angry at leaders and governments that have failed to work for peace. Indeed, the hibakusha see themselves as reminders of the need for peace, as emissaries of peace.

The oral narratives of these 20 hibakushas, then, record not just accounts of an experience; these narratives serve as vehicles through which the hibakusha explain themselves, their postwar culture and their views on peace. The lives and opinions of all these survivors changed drastically when the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945. As a result, as Miss Numata noted several times, hibakusha have many things to say to the world. The oral narrative has become one method hibakusha use to make their appeal for peace. Essays, poetry, short stories and novels by hibakusha also carry their message. In fact, during my interview with Mrs. Kurihara, she laced her oral narrative with lines of her own poetry -- one expressive form

enriching the other. One of her poems in particular, "I Would Be A Witness For Hiroshima," speaks for all hibakusha in emphasizing the importance of narrating that experience:

*I would go wherever it is, as a witness of the Hiroshima
Tragedy,
That I might proclaim its misery;
I would sing for my life
'No more wars on the earth!'*

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Notes

- 1 Butler, Robert N., *Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged*, *Psychiatry* 26 (February 1963): 65-76.
- 2 Lifton, Robert Jay, *Death In Life* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1967).
- 3 Shohno, Naomi, "Introduction" *Hibakusha: Survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* Ed. and Trans. Gaynor Sekimori (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1986) 16-27. All statistics regarding deaths and information on the medical situation after the bomb dropped were taken from this introduction.