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My Experience of the Atomic bombing

I entered elementary school in April 1945. Soon after I started going to school, it was decided that students should be sent to the countryside for evacuation from air raids. In those days, my family consisted of my father, mother, brother (a college student), four older sisters (two middle school students, a sixth grader and fourth grader), myself (a first grader), my first little sister (three years old), and my second little sister (eleven months old). With three primary school children, including myself, and still smaller ones in the family, my parents decided to send my mother and the children not yet in middle school to stay outside of Hiroshima.

My brother was drafted in the spring of 1945. Around that time, joining the army meant that you had to be prepared to die in the war and to never come back home. So we took the family photo before my brother left home, which has become the only picture of all of my family members together, because two of my sisters were killed by the A-bomb on the 6th of August, 1945.

Around the end of July, the school in the countryside where we had moved closed for the busy farming season. As my mother was worried about our house in Hiroshima, and also she needed to visit her relative in the sickbed, we temporarily came back home.

It was a clear morning on the 6th of August. The sun was glaring. My father had gone to Okayama on his business trip. He was supposed to be back in Hiroshima before August 6th, but he missed the train and was still in Okayama. My mother took my baby sister Toshiko to visit her sick relative in Itsukaichi Town on the outskirts of the city. When she was leaving home, my fourth sister Michiko asked my mother to take her also, but my mother did not allow her to come. Later my mother had to regret it forever, saying in tears, "I should have taken Michiko also. I still remember her on the street in front of the house standing to see me off for a long time."

My brother was sent to the army camp in Yamaguchi prefecture. My second sister, Hiideko, was at home together with my fifth sister Katsuko. (My first sister had already died of an illness.) Usually, she went everyday to work at a factory, because at that time students began being mobilized to munitions factories instead of attending school. But on that day, she was on a monthly holiday, and was hanging the washing on the line on the balcony. My third sister, Hiroko, was in the Fujimi district of the city together with her schoolmates, mobilized to demolish the houses to make a huge fire lane that would divide the city into north and south. It was to protect important institutions from possible fire caused by the bombing. My fourth sister, Michiko, had gone off on her bicycle to get
ice for our home refrigerator. After my mother left home, I took my immediate little sister Fumie to visit our uncle (the brother of my father) in the neighborhood. My eighth sister Toshiko was at the Kio station with my mother on their way to Itsukaichi.

My sister Fumie and I were at our uncle’s house after the air raid alert was all cleared that morning. The house surrounding the courtyard was airy and very comfortable. My aunt was cleaning the study whose windows faced to the east and the south. She played a record for children and we listening to the music. There were two sturdy wooden desks, two chairs and a bookshelf on the south side of the room. It was then that I saw a plane flying over the sky, and realized that it was a B-29 plane. “It’s a B-29 plane!” I shouted and climbed onto the windowpane to see the plane better. My cousin followed me to the window. So I moved a little to the west side on the windowpane. As we were looking at the plane together, it dropped the A-bomb, which exploded 600 meters above the ground in the air. The house where we were was 1.3 kilometers from ground zero.

When I came back to my senses, I found myself lying on the dirt ground under the window, inside the house. My cousin was lying there too. My aunt and sister Fumie, who had been in the same room, were blown farther to the entrance area of the house and my aunt was about to rise herself. The desks, two chairs, a bookshelf, tatami mats and everything else in the room were all blown away and gone. The house was new and escaped from collapsing, but many old houses in the neighborhood were crushed. The fire had not started at that time.

We stepped outside. We saw an old woman crying for help, trapped under a stone wall. The daughter of the woman and we tried to help her out, but the wall was too heavy for us to lift. Trying to take us three children with her, my aunt went to the underground shelter to look for a rope for tying them on her back. I waited for her to come back, but became terrified to see the house beginning to catch fire and flames raging out of the windows. Unable to wait for her any longer, I ran away by myself. My sister shouted to ask me to stay there but I couldn’t hear anything with fear. I stepped on the roofs of collapsed houses toward the riverbank. Seeing other people fleeing in the direction of the mountain, I followed them. After I crossed a wooden bridge called Nakahirobashi and came near the bamboo bush on the riverbank, the very bridge I had just crossed caught on fire from both its ends. Since grown up people were crossing the river on foot, I tried to follow them, but the river was too deep for me. A kind woman carried me by her side and crossed the river. Seeing that she had some cucumbers, I thought of using them to heal the burns on my face and arms. Remembering the cucumber tells me that I already knew that I had been burned.

Walking toward the mountain, I came across two of my relatives; my father’s brother-in-law and the father of my aunt. They were on their way to our house, worried about our family. When I identified myself to them, my uncle carried me on his back to an emergency clinic to sterilize and bandage the injuries on my face and arms, and took me back to his home, which was where my mother had been heading on the morning of that day. I was so relieved to be on his back, and did not remember anything before I got to his house. At his house I was able to meet my mother. She was so happy to see me and
said “At least Junko is alive.” My father’s brother-in-law drew a large two-wheeled cart and headed back to Hiroshima to look for the other members of our family. Some time later, he brought back my aunt and cousin, and my sisters on the cart. My immediate elder sister, Katsuko, who was at home then, was heavily injured.

When my father arrived in Hiroshima from Okayama, the whole city had been destroyed. He ran around in the ruined city for a few days looking for his family. Hearing from someone that we we had gone to Ishukaichi, he came and reunited with us. Later he said that when he was searching for us, suddenly a man rose and asked him, “Water, please give me some water...” He was so astonished because he thought that the man was already dead.

He later heard that Hiroko, my older sister, was injured and brought to a school. When he reached the school, all the classrooms were filled with injured people lying on the floor. My father looked for my sister from room to room, calling her name. After a few days of searching he was about to give up, when he heard a faint voice at his foot, “Daddy.” Hiroko looked so different with her injuries. My father laid her on the board and put her on his bicycle, covering her with a white cloth to avoid the scorching sun. Looking at them, some people joined their hands and murmured in Buddhist prayer, believing she was already dead. Hiroko was offended to hear their prayer and said, “I’m not dead yet!”

When she was brought to our relative’s house, she was able to say in a loud voice, “I am home!” which made all of us so glad and relieved. She was carried to the bed quilt in a tatami room, but there was virtually no treatment we were able to give her. At the moment of the flash, she was crouching down and trying to adjust her shoestrings. In those days, even during summer, schoolgirls were wearing black uniforms (to avoid being spotted by enemy airplanes), which absorbed the intense heat rays of the bomb and burned her back more heavily. Soon many maggots bred on her back injuries. Picking them off her back was about all we could do for her, but there were so many of them and as we picked one off, others would crawl deeper into her flesh, which caused her great pain. She often cried and said “Stop it now, it hurts so much.” The smell of her rotten flesh filled the room and her clothes would become dirty quickly. And cousins of my mother kindly brought some change of clothes, which my mother would remember for a long time in gratitude.

Military planes still flew over Hiroshima often and scared us all. My sisters with heavy injuries on their feet and backs were so scared as they were not able to move. My mother made a pile of bedding mattresses around them to ease their fear and told them, “Don’t worry. I will not leave you alone.”

I clearly remember the day when the war ended on August 15th. The adults listening to the broken voice of the emperor on the radio started to cry loudly. But as a small child, I felt relieved, for there would be no more bombs dropped on us.

On the next morning, August 16th, my second sister Hiroko called my mother from her sickbed when we having breakfast, saying, “Mom, could you come here for a second?”
My mother told her to wait for a moment. A little later she went to see Hiroko. With the voice of my mother crying "Hiroko! Hiroko!" we rushed to her bedside, but she was already dead. Despite the joy she gave us when she came back home, she died, without being able to receive any treatment worthy of the name. Her burns were due to intense heat from the bomb rays, which was absorbed in her black uniform. And she stayed in the radioactive environment for a long time. So I believe that the cause of her death was not only the burns but also the effect of the radiation.

After the war ended and Hiroko died, my family moved to the countryside again. Some people in the area blamed us for being A-bombed, saying that it was a punishment from heaven for leading a luxurious life in the city. We stayed there for some time, but it was hard for us from the city to live in that community. We decided to go back to the ruined Hiroshima. Father and my brother, who had been demobilized and were back from Yamaguchi, had built a shabby hut with boards and plates they collected, putting a tin roof over it. There was one 6-mat tatami room and an earth floor kitchen with a hand pump to get ground water. The shabby hut had neither electricity, nor water, and the roof was leaky. We made a bath outside of that house and we had to take a bath only after dark. But we were happier together there than in the countryside.

Let me tell you a little more about myself. I was saved by my uncle who carried me to his house in Itsukaichi, but the burns on the entire part of my face, right arm and neck took a very long time to heal. My mother was worried that I might lose sight of my right eye, which kept oozing puss. On the day of the bombing, I was wearing a simple white dress, which I believe protected my body. I was on the windowpane to see the paroxies in the sky, and the bomb's heat rays burned my face, neck and my right hand and arm, which held the window frame. These injuries of mine and the big cut on my sister's thigh did not heal easily. The sore parts kept oozing liquid and new skin would not develop. Hearing that it was a good medicine, my father brought a semi-transparent ointment in a small container. He handed it to me, saying, "Use this little by little, as it is a very expensive medicine." That ointment worked miraculously well on me. My mother and sisters always took great care to apply the medicine to my face. But the keloid on my hand and neck remained a long time. I always covered that part of my body with clothes and hated to wear short-sleeves or swimsuits in the summer. A doctor once told me that if you expose the wound to the air, the reconstruction of that part would be accelerated. That my explain the speedy recovery of the burns on my face. Covering my neck and hand could have prolonged their recovery.

The house of my mother's parents was close to the blast center. My mother collected the ashes found in the kitchen, and the ashes of a body clutching the handled of a chest of drawers, assuming that they were the remains of her parents.

My father's younger brother was in my father's company office, meeting a guest. Though we hoped he had escaped, his body was later found there on the chair. Flames might have engulfed him while he was unable to move. The guest he was meeting on that day visited us later to describe the situation.
My fourth sister, Michiko, who had gone to get ice, is still missing. My parents looked everywhere and found that she did visit the ice shop, but her whereabouts were unknown after that. Every year, they searched for her name on the annually revised list of the A-bomb deceased, but could not find her.

Thanks to the passage of time, the keloidal skin on my hand and neck has almost recovered, with that part of the skin getting thinner and the scar of the burns indistinctive.

It is hard for me to revisit and recount my experience, but nuclear weapons are still threatening our lives, and they can be used at any time. The human race has the highest intelligence on this planet, using letters and languages. Humans are supposed to be able to feel love and sorrow and the pain of others. But they still wage wars, and even depleted uranium weapons (though they may not be called nuclear arms) are used massively. How foolish humans can become! But I want to believe in humanity's wisdom.

Many of us Hibakusha do not want to tell their stories of unhealed pains in their minds and bodies. But we must tell the world what has happened and what we have gone through. Hibakusha are aged now and there are less and less of them who can tell you such stories of their experiences. We Hibakusha strong hope for a world where no one ever should experience the pains that we have experienced. The only way to achieve it is to abolish nuclear weapons. If we cooperate with the people all over the world, it is possible to make a peaceful world without nuclear weapons.

Finally, I would like to pray for the souls of the people who were killed by Atomic bombs and in wars throughout the world. Thank you.