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Ground Zero 1945. A Schoolboy's Story

Takahashi Akihiro

Introduction to the Testimony of Atomic Bomb Survivor Takahashi Akihiro

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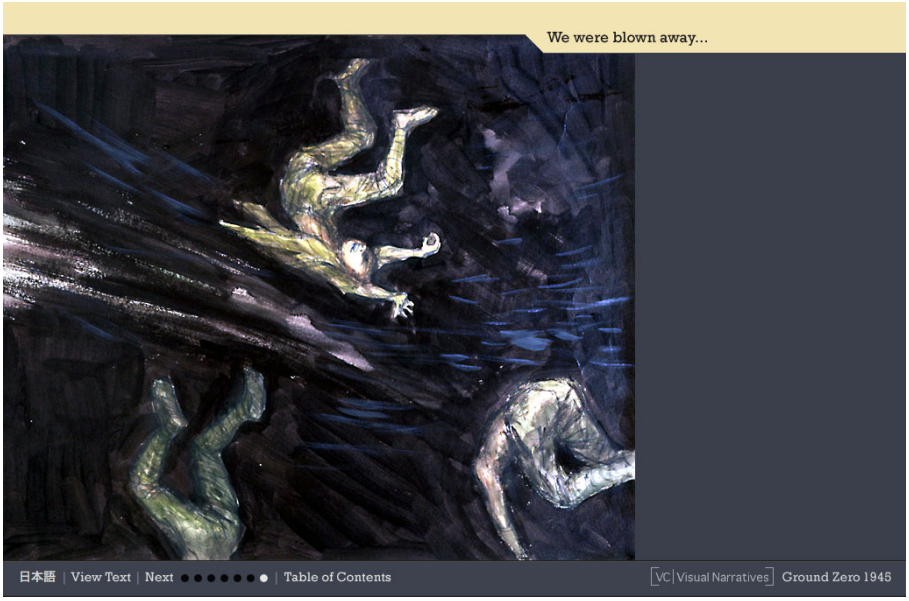
This unit was prepared for the M.I.T. Visualizing Cultures website.

Japan Focus presents the introduction to the text and the link to the illustrated children's story that accompanies it. Illustrations by Shikoku Goro. The story is available in side-by-side Japanese and English texts.

This unit presents the illustrated testimony of Takahashi Akihiro, an A-bomb survivor in Hiroshima, who was born in that city in 1931 and miraculously survived the atomic bombing on August 6, 1945 when he was 14 years old.



It took 18 months for Takahashi to regain his health after that terrible event and two years until he was able to return to school. Throughout that time he suffered constant fatigue, a common symptom among A-bomb survivors. After completing his high-school education he applied for a job in a local advertising company. Although he was told initially that his application was successful, the job offer was withdrawn when the company realized that Takahashi's right arm was partially disabled as a result of the bombing. Eventually, he was offered a temporary job at the Hiroshima City Council, where he later became a full-time worker. There too, however, he often experienced discrimination by fellow workers due to his physical disability.

Takahashi's injuries were extensive. His right hand was taut and stiff from keloid scars caused by heat rays from the bomb, so he could not move his fingers. In 1953, after a skin-graft operation that lasted five hours, he was finally able to hold a pen again and write properly. But he still could not bend his right arm more than 120 degrees, an injury which has remained with him throughout his life. His back too is permanently covered with keloid scars. Takahashi has also suffered various illnesses since his exposure to the bomb, including chronic hepatitis that still plagues him.

Despite his ill health and disabilities, Takahashi has been active in talking at various public gatherings and to school children about his experience of the nuclear holocaust. He was one of a number of A-bomb survivors who spoke about their ordeals at the first Hiroshima Citizens' Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs, held on May 15, 1954 and attended by over 1,000 people. In 1965 he went to the Soviet Union, embarking on his first overseas trip as part of his anti-nuclear campaign. While there he talked in six cities, including Irkutsk, where he addressed 30,000 people in a large sports stadium. In 1983 he spoke at the UN European Headquarters in Geneva, where a special exhibition of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was held. During this trip he visited the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) in Vienna and requested that photos and other materials concerning the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki be placed on permanent display in the IAEA building. Not surprisingly, his request was rejected.

In 1986 Takahashi was invited to China, where he met Chinese victims of atrocities committed by Japanese troops during the Asia Pacific War, such as the Nanjing Massacre and the bombing of Chongqing. These encounters had a significant impact on him. They made him realize Japan's war responsibility vis-a-vis its Asian neighbors and the importance of overcoming hatred among former enemies. In 1988 Takahashi visited Sweden, Italy, and the Vatican and met Pope John Paul II in Rome. In 1990 he attended the International Citizens' Conference for Banning Nuclear Tests, organized by IPPNW (International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War) in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Semipalatinsk, in the northeast of Almaty, was a nuclear test site of the former Soviet Union where 456 nuclear tests were conducted between 1949 and 1989. It is said that more than one-million people were irradiated as a result of these tests. Takahashi met people from Semipalatinsk who were suffering from similar illnesses to those suffered by A-bomb survivors and he formed a friendship and solidarity with them.

Takahashi has traveled to many other countries—including the United States—to inform people about the horror of nuclear attacks, and his testimony has been translated not only into English, but also into French and German. He has also been active in meeting children

from all over Japan visiting Hiroshima on school excursions. On these occasions he speaks about the importance of building a peaceful society. In 1991 he was awarded the NHK (Japan Broadcasting Commission) Broadcasting Cultural Award for his contribution to promoting peace messages both in Japan and overseas.

In June, 1980, when Takahashi visited Washington D.C. to speak at the Exhibition of the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—held in the Russell Building of the U.S. Senate and organized by the Hiroshima Youth Association—he met Paul Tibetts, the pilot of the B-29 "Enola Gay," from which the atomic bomb, "Little Boy," was dropped. The meeting was arranged by Japanese journalists from Hiroshima. It was the first time a crew member from the "Enola Gay" met an A-bomb survivor face to face.

At the meeting Takahashi said to Tibetts, "I have no intention to express my anger to you, so please feel at ease. For many years I have felt a deep hatred of American war leaders, including President Truman, who made the decision to drop atomic bombs on us, as well as for the Japanese militarists who initiated the war. But one day I realized that this hatred could not be erased by another hatred, and that peace could not be achieved by hatred. I started to think that I must overcome my hatred, although I knew it would require much courage. We, the A-bomb survivors, are appealing to the people of the world, irrespective of nationality and position, never to repeat this mistake with nuclear weapons. This is the spirit of Hiroshima, and I urge you to work for the abolition of nuclear weapons."

Tibetts responded, "I understand your feelings very well. But, if there was another war and I was ordered to drop an atomic bomb, I would obey the order again. This is the logic of war and the logic for soldiers. If war happens, we have no option but to accept orders. We must, therefore, make sure no wars are started ever again." Takahashi did not agree with Tibetts' argument about the logic of war, but he was relieved to hear Tibetts' words "we must make sure no wars are started ever again." The meeting lasted about half an hour, throughout which Tibetts held Takahashi's right hand. (At the beginning of the meeting, Tibetts had noticed the keloid scars on Takahashi's hand and asked if the scar was due to the bombing, to which Takahashi answered, "Yes.") After the meeting the two men corresponded for a while, but Tibetts stopped replying to Takahashi's letters when controversy arose concerning the exhibition of the "Enola Gay" at the Smithsonian National Air Space Museum in 1995 and Tibetts made public statements staunchly justifying the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In 1979 the then mayor of Hiroshima, Araki Takeshi, wanted to appoint an A-bomb survivor to become the director of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (the so-called A-bomb Museum). Takahashi was chosen because of his strong and sincere commitment to promoting the anti-nuclear message and because of his position as a victim of the atomic bombing. Takahashi was director for four years, during which he introduced various new programs to help as many people as possible understand the horrors of the atomic bombing. For example, he initiated a lending service of the museum's collection. This enabled other museums and grass roots peace organizations to borrow displays such as torn clothes worn by A-bomb victims and roof tiles scorched and distorted by heat rays, together with written explanations and photos.

This lending program remains one of the most popular and important services that the museum operates, and has been extended to include overseas exhibitions in the U.S., Korea, Denmark, and many other countries. Another program that Takahashi introduced as director was the tape recording of A-bomb survivors' testimonies, which were then made available for visitors to the museum. This program later developed into an audio visual service, and some of the testimonies are now available with English translation.

During the last few years Takahashi has had to spend a few months each year in the hospital due to his complicated illness, and it has become difficult for him to travel overseas. He is still, however, eager to speak about his experience at any opportunity, in Hiroshima or in other parts of Japan. He is possibly the best-known living witness to the nuclear holocaust.

The pictures illustrating Takahashi's experience were drawn by Mr. Shikoku Goro. Shikoku is a local amateur painter, although many people consider his paintings to be of professional quaility. Born in Hiroshima in 1924, he is self-taught, having enjoyed painting since childhood. Before being drafted into the army and sent to Manchuria in 1944, he worked at an army uniform textile factory in Hiroshima. He was captured by the Russian army at the end of the war and sent to Siberia to do hard labor for more than three years. On his return in 1949 he found that many of his friends and relatives—including one of his brothers—had been killed by the atomic bomb. He was also shocked by the physical condition of A-bomb survivors and started painting to convey an anti-nuclear and peace message while working at the city council. During the next fifty years he produced many moving paintings, the "mother and child" theme being his most common. In addition, he produced posters and pamphlets for the anti-nuclear and anti-war campaign, as well as the cover art for books on nuclear issues. In 1999 a limited edition of a two-volume publication of his artwork was published by a group of friends and supporters. He still lives in Hiroshima [as of this writing in 2007], but does not paint any longer.

The Visualizing Cultures Project at M.I.T.

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See also John W. Dower, Ground Zero 1945: Pictures by Atomic Bomb Survivors