The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Messages from Hibakusha: An Introduction　朝日新聞「広島・長崎の記憶––被爆者からのメッセージ」英語版開設紹介

Kyoko Selden

Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Messages from Hibakusha: An Introduction

Kyoko Selden

In September 2011 the Asahi Shimbun added an English language webpage to the Japanese language site, launched in November 2010, introducing Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors' memoirs, "Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Messages from Hibakusha" (広島・長崎の記憶––被爆者からのメッセージ , link).

The project, which provides vivid memoirs and reflections of the atomic bombing and its aftermath, goes back to 2005 when the Asahi sent out "Sixtieth Year Questionnaires" to over 40,000 Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors who were then reachable. Of these, 13,204 people responded. The questionnaire consisted of multiple choice and essay-type questions, formulated with the assistance of the Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organization, Hiroshima University, and Nagasaki University. It also provided a "message area." The original Japanese language "Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" site mostly consists of those messages attached to the questionnaire. The respondents included nine people who experienced the bombing in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The questionnaire revealed that nearly 90 percent of the respondents felt insecure about their health and that nearly 80 percent constantly recalled their bomb experiences in their daily lives (link).

Of those who responded to the questionnaire, the Asahi requested permission for online publication from 3,400 people whose addresses were still available. 1,600 people agreed and many submitted new messages.

The Asahi further conducted a 65th year survey in 2010, receiving responses from 1006 persons. Of them, nearly 30 percent replied that they talked about their experiences to others than their own family members for the first time in 2005 or later, and nearly 80 percent of people felt that talking could contribute to preventing the use of nuclear weapons.

The idea for the English site originated with Shiroishi Toshihiro of the Asahi's Osaka Head Office. Its English site began with 200 memoirs and will eventually make available a total of 370 messages. English translation involved the efforts of more than 350 volunteers of many nationalities, who worked as draft translators, readers checking translations against the original, and native speakers of English improving the style. Peter MacMillan of Kyorin University, translator of the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu (*One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each,* Columbia University Press, 2008), serves as editor of the English collection. The messages come from males and females, who were school children, mobilized students, mothers, unborn babies, and army and navy men. Some were directly hit, while others were indirectly exposed to radiation by entering the city for rescue activities and relative search soon after the bombing, undertaking relief activities and processing victims, or being in the mother's womb.

A woman who was twelve recalls her brother's words: "Father, it's burning hot already. I can't make it. Go and help Mother! Go now, father. Go please!" After yelling for help at the top of his voice, her father said, "Sorry, I'm sorry. Forgive me!" as he stepped backward. Eight years later, her father died of chronic myelocytic leukemia. A man who was thirteen writes: "Because of the approaching fire, I ran off while my friends were calling for help." Since then, he writes, he has been living with a feeling that "he failed to die," rather than with a feeling that he managed to survive. A woman, sixteen years old then, burned, with her uncle, the bodies of her parents, sister and brother. She notes, "I found that the human bodies were hard to burn with pieces of wood," and adds, "That area where I buried the bodies became a bank and a parking lot later." In a former naval officer's message, a woodworking team in his unit that helped the injured and dying quickly made some thirty small boxes for citizens' ashes. It did not take long to find out how they had underestimated the number. An electrical engineering trainee at Naval Diving School who provided aid to evacuees at an elementary school seven kilometers south of Hiroshima writes, "I can never forget the man who shouted as he fell dead, 'I am a Korean, I do not want to die like this.'"

The page also features related articles and cover stories from the Asahi Shimbun. One section introduces seven personal letters. At the time of the 2010 questionnaire the Asahi also invited hibakusha to write to someone they knew. The seven, including one addressed to a stillborn daughter, were chosen from a large number of letters.

A sample message follows with the author's permission (link). The Urakami Prison, mentioned in it, was located 100 meters (350 meters at the farthest point) north of the hypocenter, making it the closest public building. All 135 people met instant death: 19 staff members, 35 residents, and 81 inmates and criminally accused persons. The last category included 32 Chinese and 13 Koreans. This reminds us that atomic deaths and casualties also occurred at the fourteenth branch of the Fukuoka POW Camp, which held 152 Dutch, 24 Australian, and 19 British prisoners (POW Research Network Japan).

Mitsutoshi Yamaguchi (male)

'Nyushi hibaku'　/ 15 years old at the time / current resident of Nagasaki

Urakami Branch of Nagaski Prison, photo by Ogawa Torahiko

When the Atomic-bomb struck Nagasaki, I was a fifteen-year-old student at an agricultural high school. On August 11, two days after the bombing, we were sent to Nagasaki by our school to perform some tasks related to farming. My classmates and I took the Nagasaki Main Line train. My uncle, a jail keeper, happened to be on the same train. He was heading toward Urakami Prison, which was close to the hypocenter, to do whatever he could do there. As it turned out, everyone at the prison, guards and prisoners alike, was dead. He, too, got off at Michino-o Station and escorted us to Ohashi Intersection. After he left us, I continued walking with my friends. At that point, many terrible things started to come into view.

Horses, still in the posture of pulling carts, were stone dead. From place to place there were small mounds of earth with flowers on top, improvised burial plots. The trees were bare of green leaves. I saw a great number of houses with chimneys bent at impossible angles, and all the windows shattered. Young people today won't believe me, no matter what I tell them about the damage and loss the Atomic bomb caused to Nagasaki.

My uncle had to go into the hospital some years later. Sadly, he died after having struggled with an unknown illness for five or six years. I believe he had contracted A-bomb disease. For many years, I felt uneasy and worried about myself suffering the same fate. (2005)

I am given the A-bomb survivor compensation every month. I really appreciate it. Thanks to this service, I can go to the hospital about 20 days a month to have my knees and other ailments treated. I am grateful that I can continue receiving this benefit for the rest of my life.

I still have terrible nightmares of the dreadful sights I saw soon after the bombing.

I pray that nuclear war will never break out anywhere in the world. (2010)

Kyoko Selden is the coeditor and translator of The Atomic Bomb: Voices From Hiroshima and Nagasaki *and translation coordinator for The Asia-Pacific Journal. Her other translations include Kayano Shigeru's* Our Land Was a Forest, *and* Harukor: An Ainu Woman's Tale. *With Noriko Mizuta she edited and translated* Japanese Women Writers *and* More Stories by Japanese Women Writers.

Recommended citation: Kyoko Selden, 'Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Messages from Hibakusha: An Introduction,' The Asia-Pacific Journal *Vol 9, Issue 41 No 1, October 10, 2011.*

Created by Datamomentum