

Born: March 20, 1939

My Experience of the Atomic Bombing

By Junko Kayashige

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 a fourth grader), myself (a first grader), and my two younger sisters (3 years old and 11 months old). 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, and this 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 needed to visit a sick relative, 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 a business trip. He was supposed to be back in Hiroshima before Aug. 6, but he missed the train and remained 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 getting ready to leave the house, my fourth sister, Michiko, asked my mother to take her along also, but my mother did not allow her to come. My mother would regret that decision 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." My brother had been sent to the army camp in Yamaguchi prefecture. My second sister, Hideko, was at home with my fifth sister, Katsuko. My oldest sister had already died of an illness. Usually Katsuko went every day to work at a factory, because at that time, students began being mobilized to work in munitions factories instead of going to 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 with her schoolmates, mobilized to demolish houses to make a huge fire lane that would divide the city into north and south. That 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 refrigerator. After my mother left the house, I took my little sister Fumie to visit our uncle, the brother of my father, in the neighborhood. My youngest 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 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 children's record, and we listened 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 in the sky, and realized it was a B-29. "It's a B-29 plane!" I shouted, and climbed onto the window to see the plane better. My cousin followed me to the window, so I moved a little to the west side on the window. As we were looking at the plane together, it dropped the A-bomb, which exploded 600 meters above the ground. 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 get up.

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 collapse, 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. We joined her daughter in trying 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 to tie them on her back. I waited for her to come back, but became terrified when I saw 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 me to stay there, but I couldn't hear anything because of 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 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 we 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 that morning. 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 reunite with my mother. She was so happy to see me and said, "At least Junko is alive." My father's brother-in-law took a

large, two-wheeled cart and headed back to Hiroshima to look for the other members of our family. Sometime 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 badly 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 had gone to Istukaichi, he 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 had thought the man was already dead. He later heard that Hiroko, my older sister, was injured and had been 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, saying "Daddy."

Hiroko looked so different with her injuries. My father laid her on a 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 the Buddhist prayer, believing she was already dead. Hiroko was offended to hear their prayers 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 had been crouching down and trying to adjust her shoestrings. In those days, even during summer, schoolgirls wore black uniforms (to avoid being spotted by enemy airplanes), and the uniforms absorbed the intense heat rays of the bomb and burned her back more heavily.

Soon many maggots gathered 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. Cousins of my mother kindly brought some changes 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 Aug. 15. 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, Aug. 16, my second sister, Hiroko, called my mother from her sickbed while we were 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. Hearing the voice of my mother crying "Hiroko! Hiroko!" we rushed to her bedside, but Hiroko 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 the intense heat from the rays of the bomb, which were 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. **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 my entire face, right arm and neck took a very long time to heal. My mother was worried that I might lose sight in my right eye, which kept oozing pus.

On the day of the bombing, I was wearing a simple white dress, which I believe protected my body. I was on the window to see the plane 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, and a 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 good medicine, my father brought a semi-transparent ointment in a small container. He handed it to me and said, "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.

A doctor once told me that if you expose the wound to the air, the reconstruction of that part would be accelerated. That may explain the speedy recovery of the burns on my face. Covering my neck and hand could have delayed 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 handle 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 a 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 had visited the ice shop, but her whereabouts are 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 burned skin on my hand and neck has almost recovered, with that part of the skin getting thinner and the scar of the burns indistinct. 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 widely.

How foolish humans can become! But I want to believe in humanity's wisdom.

Many of us Hibakusha do not want to tell our stories of unhealed pain in our 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 fewer and fewer of us who can tell you stories of our experiences.

We Hibakusha strongly hope for a world where no one ever should experience the pains that we have experienced. The only way to achieve this 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.