

August 6, that fateful day

By Kiyoko Komeyoshi

My name is Kiyoko Komeyoshi. I am 84 years old. I was in my teens when I lived through a most unimaginably horrible time.

In order to encourage future generations to abolish nuclear weapons and bring peace to the world, I would like to share my personal story of the atomic bombing.

I was born in Tenma-cho in the city of Hiroshima on July 18, 1932. We lived downtown, not far from what is now called the A-bomb Dome which marks the hypocenter of the explosion. I used to play around the domed building and swim in the Honkawa River nearby.

My memory of the A-bombing is forever tied to my memories of studying hard during elementary school and entering girls' school. At 13-years-old I had graduated from Tenma Elementary School and passed my exams to enroll in the Second Hiroshima Prefectural School for Girls in April. This had been a happy and celebratory occasion for me.

But now, in the midst of the Asian Pacific War, we were mobilized to work even on Sundays and through the summer. During August, rather than studying at school, we were forced to help with house demolition in Zakoba-cho in order to create fire breaks.

On August 5, 1945, when we had finished work for the day, we were suddenly told that the next day we would be transferred to the East Military Drill Grounds to weed the potato fields. All 100 first year students and half of the second year students would make the transfer and then all students would return to Zakoba-cho to help with the demolitions on August 7. The second year class leaders used "janken" (rock, paper, scissors) to determine which second year classes would go to the military drill grounds and which classes would continue the demolitions in the center of town. The East class won. I was among the 150 students who would be working at the East Military Drill Grounds. As we dismissed, we confirmed that we would all be working together again at Zakoba-cho on August 7.

On August 6 I grabbed my lunch box, which my father had risen early to prepare, and headed for the tram. The healthiest children had to walk, but for a change, I got to ride on the tram that morning. We arrived at the East Drill Grounds and began working in the fields assigned to us.

Just as we were starting to work, friends around me began shouting, "Here comes a B29!" As I stood to look up, I saw an intense flash of light. Extreme heat struck the back side of my body. Immediately, I covered my eyes and ears and dropped to the ground between the rows of potatoes.

I don't know how long it was before I regained consciousness and became aware of the commotion around me, but when I opened my eyes, it was dark. I pinched my face and thought "I'm still alive! I must get away!" I ran through the darkness to where I had left my bag. As the sky gradually grew lighter again, I looked around and saw that nothing had escaped the destruction. Tree limbs were torn off. Telephone poles were broken and the electric lines were

hanging low to the ground. Houses had collapsed. Roof tiles and debris were scattered all around. There was hardly room to walk along the street. My bag had been blown away and was nowhere to be found.

My friends began to gather together but I could barely recognize them in their charred and tattered clothes, skin hanging off their bodies, eyes and mouths swollen. Becoming aware that one crouching figure was my good friend, I ran to help her, calling, "Take my hand and lean on my shoulder so we can go home together." But she could only reply, "I can't see and my legs won't move. If you come across my father searching for me, please tell him where I am." She was so severely burned, I could hardly recognize her.

Just then I heard the clear strong voice of our homeroom teacher calling, "Follow me! Follow me!" Along with many of my friends, I took courage in his voice and followed after him. With fires breaking out all around the Nigitsu Shrine area, we brushed off ashes and walked on toward the teacher's house in Ushita.

We arrived to find that our teacher's house had collapsed. We sat on the ground and put our feet in the stream in front of the house. This gave us a small sense of relief. There must have been about 20 of us students. Around then some people passed by yelling, "If you drink water you'll die! Don't drink water!" But our bodies felt like they were burning. We wanted so badly to drink and to immerse ourselves in water, but we bravely restrained ourselves.

Just then friends near me yelled, "Your back is burning!" and they peeled off my clothing. The middle of my jacket had burned up and the surrounding fabric was smoldering. I became aware for the first time that the back of my head, my back and my arms were burned and covered with blisters. Still worse than the pain was my intense desire for a drink of water and a desperate longing to pour water over my head. But remembering the warnings, I was determined to stay away from water.

The spreading fires were coming our way, so our teacher evacuated us all to the hill where there was shrine. Saying "you must stay here until I return to get you," he went back to his home. The hillside was filling up with escaping survivors moving about in confusion. People suffering severe burns and injuries were crying out for help, collapsing and dying. It was hell. Even though it was midday there was no sun or blue sky. I was sitting in a strange sort of dusk.

Several hours must have passed before our teacher finally returned. Saying "the flames in the city seem to be dying down," he led us to the gate of the Yasuda Girls' School and instructed us to head for our homes with others going in the same direction. "Just don't go through the center of the city," he said. I found two second year students heading toward Koi and decided to go home with them.

After crossing the Kohei Bridge, we came to the long railroad bridge crossing the Ota River. If we closed our eyes for the slightest moment we would lose our footing. Afraid to cross standing up, we crawled across to the other side. From Yokogawa Station to Tokaichi we leapt as fast as we could over the scorching street car tracks. Not being able to endure the heat any longer, we approached a burned-out street car, thinking we would climb in. But when we reached the door we could see that charred bodies were crowding the doors and windows as though trying to get in or out. We could not distinguish between the living and the dead. No one was moving.

Giving up on the streetcar, we continued our walk. We could see another burned out streetcar ahead and hurried toward it, hoping to be able to get in. Our bodies were exposed to the hot winds and we worried that we would lose the soles of our feet to the heat of the streets.

Along the way, we met up with three or four firemen who were coming to the rescue from Otake.. "If you keep up your strength, you will meet up with your families again. Koi Elementary School has been set up as a first aid station, so please go there to have your burns treated." They encouraged us with these words.

Once again we headed for Koi along the street car tracks. Wherever we went we saw many victims sitting or lying about on the ground. A child appearing to be about three or four years old was lying dead on the ground without apparent injury but with blackened skin, looking like a mannequin.

Even Koi Elementary School had suffered damage from the bomb blast. The auditorium, classrooms and playground were all filled with injured people and people who were walking around searching, and we could find no place to sit. As we became acclimated I became more aware of my burns but when I saw the severity of the injuries around me I was embarrassed by my relatively good condition and gave up on seeking treatment.

Here I met some neighbors who reported that my father was fine. My two companions and I were crouched down near the school building when a student from Yamanaka Girls' High School came by. "Have you had anything to eat?" she asked. Saying "please don't move from this spot!", she left and returned with large rice balls made from polished white rice and a canteen of tea. We had had nothing to eat since morning and we nearly cried for joy as we bit into the rice balls.

On the school grounds many holes were being dug. Bodies were piled into the holes and were being cremated. The fires turned the sky red and as they continued to burn we could hear voices calling for their children, searching for loved ones, moaning, crying out in agony. We sat in the midst of this hell, waiting for morning.

Much later, newspapers would report that the remains of 2,000 bodies were found in the grounds of Koi Elementary School and exhumed. A monument was erected to comfort their spirits.

The next day, on the 7th, I left my two school mates and walked to the open space in front of my house. Many of our neighbors were taking refuge there and they were overjoyed at my return. They told me how my father had left early in the morning to search for me at the East Drill Grounds. Our house had caught fire in the morning and the entrance and storage areas had been destroyed. All around, houses had collapsed and we could hear the voices of people trapped under the debris, but it was impossible to save them. I was able to eat some boiled vegetables from the gardens in the neighborhood.

August 8. My father salvaged food from the collapsed food distribution site and handed it out all day long to neighbors who gathered around.

August 9. I put on the straw sandals that my father made for me and walked the 25 kilometers to Yuki to evacuate. As though in response to my relief at my escape, I ran a high fever from that night and am told that in my delirium I kept yelling out, "The house is on fire! The bridge is collapsing!"

I was admitted to the hospital as a hibakusha in need of emergency care. The treatment, however, was little more than the application of mercurochrome and gauze. When they would remove the gauze, I would cry out in intense pain. Two or three days after the bombing I hadn't been terribly bothered by pain from my burns, but now I had to wait for them to heal by sitting up and hugging folded futon as I slept. My younger sister was now attending a school near the hospital and every morning she would bring a large bottle of fresh milk. Thanks to her, my burns healed nicely and quickly.

I learned that our girls' school had reopened at the end of October. By this time we were living in a shelter my father had built on the former site of the Nakahiro Distribution Facility, and I was able to return to school in November. All 50 of our school mates (the West Class) who had been working on house demolition on August 6 had died. Many of my other childhood friends who had enrolled in my first-choice school, First Hiroshima Prefectural Girls' High School and my friends who had enrolled in other schools, had also died.

I returned to the burnt out city center. Roof tiles were lined up on the ground and handfuls of bones on the tiles were exposed to the wind and rain.

In April I had enrolled in school with hope and dreams for the future. But rather than being allowed to study, we had been mobilized to work hard "for our country." And now, just four months later, we were in the midst of a horror that none of us could ever have imagined.

In 1946 the education system was reconfigured and I moved from the girls' school to a high school in the new system. After graduation I went on to dressmaking school, where I studied for three years. I got married after that without ever entering the work force.

In the years that followed, I immersed myself in the tasks of raising children. When I would think back on the ordeal of the bombing I would always wonder what ever happened to the two schoolmates who had escaped from the city with me. I would ask around about them and it bothered me that I could find no trace of their whereabouts. Now I can no longer remember their names or even their faces.

After all these years, I have never been able to shake off the memory of the stench of the city destroyed by fire. The smell continues to haunt me to this day. It is the smell of agony and sadness. I wonder if I will ever be free of it.

On August 6, 2012, my sixth grade granddaughter was selected as a representative of the city to offer flowers at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Ceremony. It is my hope that the message of peace will be passed down to our children and grandchildren.

In the 30 years since I have been free from the duties of childcare I have walked every morning to the Peace Memorial Park, even in light rain. No matter which direction I enter from, I walk past five or six memorial monuments and pay my respects as I go. I also go to the monuments

dedicated to those who reached out a helping hand immediately after the bombing. These included the Swiss Doctor Marcel Junod, and Americans Norman Cousins and Barbara Reynolds. Here I pray for peace in the world.

So many of my childhood friends and school mates died in an instant on that day. The lives of many others were dramatically altered by the war. This must never happen again. We owe the peace we have built to the more than 200,000 people who lost their lives. The flame in the Hiroshima Memorial Peace Park will be extinguished when all the world's nuclear weapons have been dismantled. Every day I pray for the day when the flame is put out and the world is at peace.

To everyone who hears my story, I implore you to make world peace a reality through your daily actions. Thank you for your attention.