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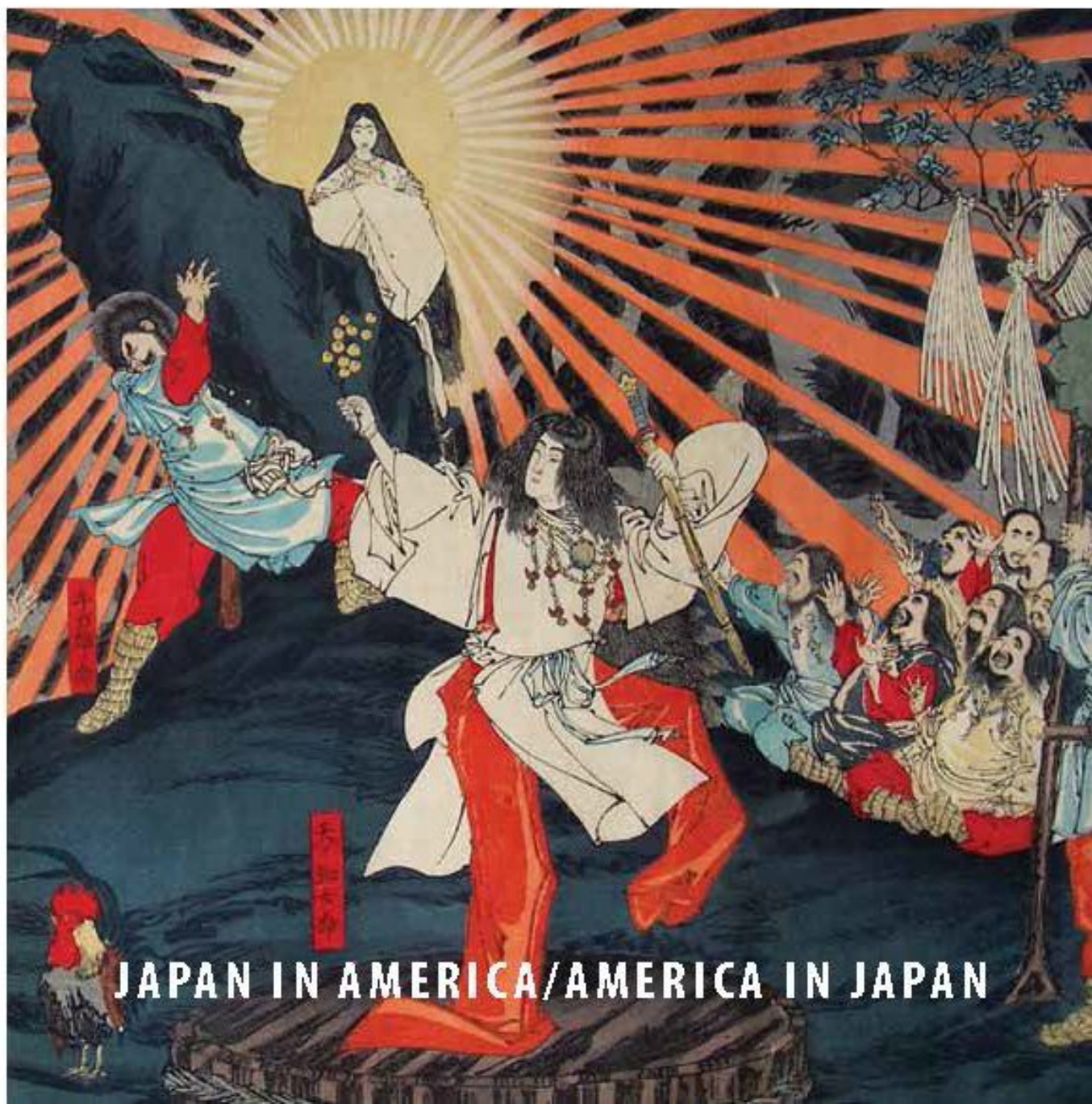
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Hiroshima—One Man's Memories

Akio Inoue

THE SUMMER I turned sixteen, I was living in Hiroshima with my parents, aged grandmother, and older sister. My father, Takio, with help from my mother, Motoko, had for many years operated two general-goods stores. But, under the pressure of growing wartime demands, the available inventory of goods had dwindled, and by 1945 the stores had essentially ceased to function. Fortunately, my twenty-three-year-old sister, Chigusa, still had a job, working as a dietician for a local government office.

I also had two older brothers, but both of them had been taken away for wartime service. We knew only that Yoshio, the eldest, had been assigned as a navigation officer on a merchant vessel. We would learn later that he had survived the sinking of his ship by an American B-24 in Pusan, Korea. My other brother, Hisao, had been drafted into the Army in March 1945. He was nineteen. We had no idea what had become of him. Naturally, we worried about both boys.

We struggled like other Japanese families in those trying days, doing our best to get by. Our situation became even more difficult when, from time to time that summer, my father was called away to assist with the excavation of mountain caves where the Japanese Army hoped to protect supplies and equipment from American air raids. His last assignment would prevent his return to the city until soon after Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces in August.

By government order, in mid-June 1944, along with my ninth-grade classmates, I had left my studies behind and begun to commute to the Army Clothing Factory in another part of the city. We worked there every day, except for the first and third Sundays of the month.

Our primary job was to carry crated army boots, uniforms, and other army gear on our shoulders from trucks to warehouses, from warehouses to trucks, and from trucks to boats, day in and day out. This was no easy task for young boys as most of the crates weighed over 80 pounds. As a lasting reminder of those trying times, my shoulders remain uneven to this day. Our work as heavy laborers continued until August 6, 1945, the day the atomic bomb annihilated Hiroshima.

August 5, 1945, one day before the atomic bomb exploded over our city of Hiroshima, happened to be a Sunday. I spent all that Sunday afternoon sorting through my collection of books and packing them in wooden boxes. As an avid reader, I treasured those books and worried the war might cause them to be lost or damaged. To guard against that eventuality, I placed the boxes near the door to the garden behind our house. I would be ready to carry them out quickly in case of an incendiary bomb attack. Innocently, we believed that was the only type of air raid we had to fear. In our wildest imagination, we had no idea of what fate had in store for our city and for us.

I've retained little else about that last day before everything in our world changed. I do recall that, after I packed the books, my sister and I baked homemade bread in a kind of toaster oven. We made the bread using rationed flour to supplement our limited supply of rice, a staple that was both rationed and scarce.

I got up early the following morning, as I did regularly, and set out on the long commute to work. It was August 6; it seemed a day like any other. I did not know my sister had called in sick to her office and would be staying home. My mother and grandmother were also at home.

I'd been troubled by a sinus problem and wasn't feeling well. So, once I arrived at work, I obtained permission to see a doctor at one of the city's leading medical facilities, the Red Cross Hospital. The Army Clothing Factory was located about two miles southeast of what would be the epicenter of the blast.

There had been an air raid warning earlier in the morning. We had become accustomed to such warnings. I left the factory soon after the all-clear signal had sounded. It must have been about 7:30. Leaving the factory, I walked along a narrow lane for about ten minutes until I came out on a wider street, where I sighted a streetcar about to leave its stop. I dashed after that streetcar and jumped aboard.

The streetcar carried me, along with its other passengers, directly toward the point in the city where the bomb would explode. Hurrying to my destination, impulsively I hopped off the streetcar about a block before its regular stop. Had I stayed on that trolley, I would never have made it to the hospital. (The hospital was located about one mile south of the epicenter.)

I passed through the gate to the Red Cross Hospital, climbed a flight of stone steps, and crossed a driveway. I can still see the people lined up at a registration window, just to the right of the entrance. I know I took out my wallet as I approached that window.

Seconds later, and the last thing I remember, there came a brilliant flash of light behind me. I did not even hear the sound of the explosion. The shock wave struck us with great speed, greater than the speed of sound.

The next eight hours remain a blank. Much later, scientists conducted a computer-simulated test for a building located 500 feet further from the epicenter than the Red Cross Hospital. The test revealed that people in the simulated building would have been lifted by the shockwave, hurled through the air, and tossed back to the floor. I can only wonder if that happened to me. I simply do not know.

When I revived, I found myself in a horribly different world. The air was thick with cries and groans. I lay on a hospital floor littered with injured

people, dying people, and dead people. It was a place full of pain, of agony, and of suffering. I had been transported on an instant journey to hell.

It took me some time to fully regain consciousness. Little by little I pieced together where I was and guessed there had been some kind of strong bomb blast. I did not immediately realize, however, that I was injured, let alone how badly. Later I discovered a large number of glass fragments imbedded in my face and in my badly bruised and swollen lips. The left side of my face was also burned and bruised. Yet, I was one of the fortunate ones.

Curiously, one of my army boots had gone missing. I searched for it, but I could not find it anywhere. I determined to somehow make my way home; a place where I imagined safety, food and rest awaited me. I set off, hobbling along with just one boot. When I emerged from the hospital, the skeletal structure of which had somehow survived the explosion, I saw the entire city smoldering, the sky thick with smoke. Flames still burned here and there. And, not a single green tree remained—trees which only hours earlier had adorned the streets, parks, and school grounds. The devastation was so massive, so extensive; I simply could not comprehend it. I cannot comprehend it even today.

Just short of the streetcar stop, where I ordinarily would have gotten off that morning, countless dead bodies with charred faces littered the ground along the streetcar track.

I crossed three bridges and walked about three miles in my struggle to get home. I did not realize then that eight hours earlier, a mass of 20,000 hideously deformed, ghostly human beings had crossed those same bridges, desperately seeking to escape from the burning Hiroshima hell into the western suburbs. When I crossed the last of those bridges, I encountered a classmate whom I asked about my injuries. At first he did not seem to recognize me. He said nothing about how I looked, as he kept staring at my face.

Our house had been located one mile west of the epicenter. When I reached the place where it had been, I discovered it had burned to the ground. I should have been shocked, but I had been so numbed by all that had happened earlier in the day. I could not see a single trace of my book collection—it had been completely incinerated. The trees and shrubs in our garden had been obliterated. All that remained of our beautiful garden was the pathetic stump of a once-huge pine tree, broken and bent four feet above the ground.

I soon located my mother and sister in a vacant lot across the street. My mom had been injured by falling debris, her leg broken and a foot and ankle damaged. On top of those injuries, she had a dislocated hip. She was lying

on the ground, trying to be brave, but in excruciating pain. Luckily, my sister had been home. She had been able to pull mom out of the wreckage of our collapsed house and to drag her across the street just before the house burst into flames.

We lived next to the Fukushima River, and, only twenty feet from where my mother lay, several dead bodies were scattered on the riverbank. They must have been the bodies of people who had tried to escape the city and made it that far before they collapsed. Already the bodies had become bloated, like grotesque balloons, under the hot summer sun. And their burnt skin had peeled back, exposing flesh seared by heat and radiation. It is a scene frighteningly and forever etched in my mind.

Somewhere in the course of events, I must have acquired some kind of footwear. When or how is a mystery, its explanation gone from memory. In any case, still numb, I went off to search for our grandma. She had gone out to buy cut flowers and had been missing since the explosion. I walked about in the area where grandma went daily to meet the flower vendor, an area not far from where our house had stood not long before. Although I was still in a bomb-induced stupor, I made several trips among shattered houses and through debris-filled streets. We never found her. Later we heard she had been reported dead in Tenma-cho, a neighboring locality. Why she would have been there we would never know.

The details of all that happened along that riverbank and of what others did that first night have been lost in the shadows of time. Nevertheless, I can never forget the piteous image of dead people and dead horses scattered along the edge of the river and on sandbanks in the shallows, like Japanese chess pieces dumped randomly from a bag.

As darkness enveloped the area, I went back to my mother and collapsed on the ground next to her. I do not know how long I had been asleep when my sister woke me to give me a rice-ball to eat. It was a good thing I could not see my face, as my lips were now blistered from burns and marked by the imbedded fragments of glass. I was forced to break the rice-ball into small pieces so I could pass them, one by one, through the corner of my swollen and damaged mouth. When I had finished eating, I dropped back into sleep under the beautiful Milky Way that arched above our ruined city.

I do remember one more thing that occurred that first night. As I lay there next to the river, a thick, brown fluid bubbled up out of my stomach and through my mouth. I simply allowed it to flow over my cheek and drip to the ground. I am not certain, but I think that vomiting that night perhaps helped relieve my system of radiation contaminants. I learned later that many survivors had a similar experience.

The following morning, I awoke with the sun shining on my face. Our sagging spirits were lifted when one of our neighbors told us he'd heard an army truck would arrive in the area to pick up those in need of medical treatment.

Around noon, some of our neighbors came by and helped us move our mother to a wide main street a few blocks away. We needed at least four people to lift her onto the stretcher as her broken foot, leg and thigh all gave her great pain when she was moved even slightly in a wrong direction. We were forced to place her on the hot paved street under a scorching summer sun, without shade of any sort. There we waited for the promised vehicle. A pickup truck finally drove up five hours later. We somehow got our mother and ourselves onto the back of that pickup, which then made its way to the Ujina seaport, a facility located at the southernmost end of the city. Once we arrived there, volunteers unloaded Mom onto one of the piers; it had an open-sided roofed shelter with a cement floor. We hoped for a doctor, but no doctor came.

We encountered still another heartbreaking situation on that pier. For whatever reason, several small kids had also been delivered there. Too young to realize they had likely become instant orphans, they wandered around crying for their missing parents.

From time to time air-raid sirens screamed, and soldiers, pressed into relief work, urged us to run for cover. But our mother could not move, and we stayed with her. At intervals she would relieve herself on a rag, which I then took to the water's edge to wash, dry, and to use again. Someone must have provided us with food and water, yet nothing comes to mind when I try to summon back such details. In any case, we stayed the night at the port.

The following day, local authorities informed us we would be taken to Ninoshima, an island in Hiroshima Bay, where shelter and medical treatment were said to be available. Because so many people had been grievously hurt, our own injuries seemed minor. Although injured, my sister and I could both walk. For that reason we were ordered to get on one boat, and our mother was carried on a stretcher to another boat. We wanted to stay with her, but the authorities would not permit it.

As our boat made its way to the island, an American fighter flew low over us and strafed our boat. Water shot up in geysers around us. Before that raid, my sister and I had been on the boat's top deck. Because of the firing, we retreated to a lower deck. Even those who could hardly move without help managed to get below.

When we finally landed on Ninoshima, we discovered it to be a small island teeming with injured people. They seemed to be everywhere, and many,

if not most, hovered near death. We searched and searched for our mother. We were especially concerned about her toilet needs, but we could not find her anywhere on the island. Our hopes rose with each new boat that arrived; still there was no sign of our mother. At a loss about what to do, we were beside ourselves with worry.

Finally someone told me one boat had not unloaded its injured and had, instead, headed for another island called Miyajima. After a long wait, we boarded a boat going to that island, but by the time we docked darkness had settled over the bay and the destroyed city.

Among the people who arrived on the island of Miyajima with us, I vividly remember a tall gentleman in a white shirt. His face was bruised and battered, yet it still showed grace and intelligence. Someone said he was a university professor. In the darkness, he paced along the edge of the island's small pier. The lights of a small town on the mainland shone before him. It seemed like a jewel-bedecked fairyland, but distant and out of reach. The gentleman occasionally peered into the night at those lights reflected on the sea. He talked loudly to himself as he paced back and forth along the pier. What he said, however, made absolutely no sense; it was all gibberish.

When I awoke the following morning, he had vanished. I felt happy to think that perhaps he was one of the luckier victims. After drifting across the dirty gray expanse of the Hiroshima wasteland, before his death he at least had been allowed to see the beautiful and normal lights of the town twinkling and dancing on the waves.

In Miyajima there were a number of Shinto shrines, each of which posted a list of victims it sheltered. We walked from one shrine to the next, but our mother's name failed to appear on any of the lists. Then, frustrated and exhausted, we heard a single boat had taken its human cargo to Hatsukaichi, a town back on the mainland. We climbed onto still another boat and headed for the town. We landed at the mouth of a small river and made our way on foot to a grade school, one where the classrooms and gymnasium were being used to shelter bomb victims.

We at last located our mother, near the gymnasium entrance. Tears glistened in her eyes when she saw us after two days of separation. Relieved as I was to find her, I remained physically and emotionally numb from all that had happened. We were to live in that gymnasium without bedding for about three weeks.

On the day after we located my mother in the gymnasium, I took a free ride on a still-functioning streetcar to a west-side Hiroshima terminal. From there I walked to the site of our former house and managed to retrieve some oil, butter, and rice stored in our backyard bomb shelter. I also posted a

handwritten sign providing the location of the place where we had taken shelter.

During our stay in the gymnasium, we witnessed many human tragedies. I have shut most of them out of my mind, but recollections of some persist.

—Every night a dozen or so people would begin to ramble endlessly in delirium, some loudly, some softly. We soon came to realize they would be cold and quiet before dawn.

—A supply of a dozen or so rough wooden caskets was piled a few feet from us in a corner. That supply had to be replenished every day.

—Some people in the gym had escaped the city without so much as a scratch or burn. Yet, roughly a week after the blast, their hair began to fall out, they developed a fever, and died—just died. Some of them had been in the basements of concrete buildings or in shelters when the bomb had detonated. Nonetheless, invisible radiation had found them. It was heart-wrenching to see their short-lived happiness at apparently having escaped in perfect condition. The loss of one's hair became a death sentence.

—A pretty girl, perhaps eight years old, lost her smile a few days after she was brought into the shelter. She lay with one side of her face against the wooden floor. Her cheek lost its strength and sagged like freshly kneaded dough that slowly spreads on a baking sheet. Her despairing mother sat by her side, not knowing how to help her.

Some of the wounds on our mother's leg began to turn yellow with pus and became infested with maggots. We removed them daily with chopsticks

During our stay in the gymnasium, I developed an excruciating headache. When I mentioned it to a doctor, he said I likely had a skull fracture, but he could not tend to it. A skull fracture seemed a relatively minor problem, something the doctors were too busy to take care of.

Even though I had been sheltered in the hospital entrance at the time of the explosion, the left side of my face became distinguishably darker as a result of radiation. Every day my sister smeared the skin with sesame oil, and kept it oily all the time. We did not know what else to do. In any case, perhaps thanks to my sister's improvised treatment, the dark shading disappeared within three years. (This improvement would disappoint my eldest brother. He had predicted the dark shade would remain for the rest of my life, making me a living piece of atomic bomb history.)

We soon heard the bomb dropped on Hiroshima had been a new kind of weapon. We also heard that no living thing could survive in Hiroshima for at least 70 years because of the radioactivity. This, of course, turned out not to be true, but we had no way of determining what was real and what was not real in those confused days after our city was obliterated. We quickly learned

another bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki. The war came to an end on the 15th of August.

As I mentioned, my father had been out of the city when the bomb exploded, but he was able to return to Hiroshima through the Ujina seaport soon after. He told us later he could see from one end of the city all the way across to the other. As he stared at the entire city, charred and flattened, he believed his family members had all perished. Happily he was wrong, and he located us after a few days, thanks to the sign I had left at the site of our destroyed house.

Soon after that, my eldest brother made his way back to Japan and found us at the gymnasium. My worried mother then asked us to search for our other brother, Hisao, who had been stationed at an army base at Tokuyama in Yamaguchi Prefecture. We rode a train to Tokuyama and made our way to the base on foot. When we arrived there, an officer told us Hisao had been assigned to a special center to be trained as a suicide pilot for a manned torpedo. We could only conclude he had been sent on a mission and lost. We were wrong. Not only had he survived the war, he turned up in late September with a small wagon loaded with rice, crackers and other food, as well as some army blankets.

At the end of August we hired an ox-drawn cart to carry our mother to the mountainside farm of a distant relative, a place where we would live as survivors for the next two years or so. Our income and savings gone, we made do, living in what had been a kind of storage shed. Earlier in the war we had fortunately evacuated some furniture and clothing to that farm. Moreover, we were able to grow some rice and vegetables there. Nonetheless, our life was extremely difficult.

My father also planted some sweet potatoes on a quarter acre plot that first summer. Amazingly, just a few days before harvesting, a band of wild monkeys, apparently driven from the mountains by hunger, descended on the little field and stripped it bare. Somehow it seemed a foreboding sign of a disastrous future. And we were naturally sorry to see our father's work go for nothing. He was unaccustomed to such hard labor.

Our schooling resumed in mid-September in an abandoned army barracks located on a farm in Haramura. This was approximately 20 miles from where our family was staying. We students reached the place by train, then by foot from the train station. While there, we worked on the farm and pursued our studies. Once again it seemed the fates conspired against us. Soon after our arrival, one of the three largest typhoons in Japanese history, the Makurazaki Typhoon, surged over us. Our thatch-roofed barracks swayed to and fro and we had to evacuate from them, clinging to each other outside until the violent storm moved on.

In January 1946, we relocated to a makeshift school located in Kannonmachi on the southwest side of the city of Hiroshima. Still living on the relative's farm, I had to walk three miles on a mountain road to the train station and, following a train ride, transfer to a streetcar. After the streetcar ride, I walked about a mile to a rented schoolhouse, which had been a training center for employees at the huge shipbuilding company, Mitsubishi Zosen.

Even there we experienced the baleful effects of the bomb. The explosion had shattered all the windowpanes, and winter's cold winds blew in from the sea to torment us while we were in class. When snow fell, it flew in; and when rain fell, it poured in. Unfurling our umbrellas in the classroom was no childish clowning act. It became a necessary measure to protect us from the elements.

At the end of the school day, I reversed the route to go home. I often was forced to wait for the train for two hours in the windowless, ruined Hiroshima Station, a place where I could barely avoid the falling snow or cold winter rain. The station, too, still bore the scars of the atomic bomb.

My memories of life in those immediate post-war years are filled with torment and regret. As with many other survivors, the hurtful effects of the bomb followed us for a long time and in unexpected ways. My sister had studied so hard and hoped to enter medical school. But under pressure from the owners of the place we were staying, in December 1946 she reluctantly married their farmer stepson, something that earlier would have been unthinkable. Had she not agreed to this marriage, however, our family would likely have been evicted—this at a time when Hiroshima was uninhabitable and neighboring villages crowded with bomb victims.

In September 1947, she gave birth to a baby girl. Then, almost immediately, my sister's health began to deteriorate. She became sickly pale, threw up whenever she ate, and suffered from incessant diarrhea. We all recognized the awful signs of radiation sickness. I remember that at the time deep red *higanso* flowers were in bloom along the roadsides. I went several times to dig up the bulbs of these flowers. We'd heard they could help with the swelling in my sister's legs. Near the end of the month my sister died, a victim of the bomb's lingering effects.

Before she left this earth, my sister's main concern was the education of her daughter whom she feared would be raised among uneducated people in a remote village. My mother promised to see to my niece's education. After moving back to Hiroshima, she kept her promise. Leaning on her cane, she often walked miles back to the farm to visit the little girl, who was by then around three years old. Unfortunately, my mother had never really recovered

from her injuries and became physically unable to fulfill her promise. In 1952, she, too, passed away, an indirect, if not direct, victim of the bomb.

I also continued to deal with the effects of the bomb. In the weeks immediately after our city was destroyed, made numb by the experience, I had seemingly lost all my normal emotional responses. For many weeks, I felt nothing; I was a kind of empty vessel. But, once we moved into the farm storage shed, away from Hiroshima, my emotions began to revive.

I remember vividly that I started to cry frequently at the thought of our grandma's death. Why hadn't I put more effort into searching for her? I could have checked more streets and lanes, but I had failed to do so. My mind, however, had not been functioning properly. Besides, as I mentioned, the narrow lanes and streets were clogged with fallen houses and charred roof tiles. Yet, no matter how I reviewed those circumstances, remorse and guilt were my constant companions. We loved my grandmother very much, and I knew she had been saving money for me, which, in the chaos that was Hiroshima after the bombing, I never tried to locate.

At last, after two years on the farm, my father managed to rent a plot of land in Hiroshima. He built a house there using salvaged materials. Our family savings had turned worthless overnight because of hyperinflation, a new currency (yen), and a government freeze on bank accounts. Before the bomb changed everything, Mom always assured us that, if we lived frugally, our savings would last a lifetime. Despite her assurances, in one way or another, our savings had evaporated. Somehow we made do. Living with no money, no clothes, and no books proved to be a heavy burden, one that at times seemed overwhelming.

During those days I frequently thought about suicide. I remember one specific night when I began to cry hysterically and stepped out in front of the house. I lay there on the ground sobbing and declaring I would kill myself. My eldest brother followed me out carrying a short sword. He thrust the sword into my hand and said, "Go ahead and die." I realized immediately I lacked the courage to commit suicide. I never mentioned "suicide" again, even though I secretly continued to look for an easier method and better place to die.

During these immediate post-war years I was extremely fatigued. I would often simply lean against a wall and then slide slowly to the floor—a heap of skin and bones. I felt hunger, yet my stomach could accept only small amounts of food. One doctor told me I would be lucky if I lived five more years. My older brother promised he would take care of me as long as I lived. However, he could not fulfill his promise, as he died first, many years ago.

I suppose the phenomenon is common to defeated people everywhere, not just Hiroshima survivors, but I lost faith in everything on earth; savings, land ownership, academic achievement, other people—everything. I convinced myself the only thing you could rely on was yourself and your wits. I was totally downcast, depression of the worst sort. Once or twice I told my father I intended to quit high school and live self-reliantly on my own, without the benefit of social amenities; just a bare-bones existence. My father counseled me to be patient, not to give up hope, and at least obtain a high school diploma. Reluctantly, I followed his advice.

I know now my poor health, mostly attributable one way or another to the bomb, no doubt contributed to my extreme pessimism. Every day toward evening, my temperature would slightly elevate enough to make me uncomfortable. Even a minor stomach disorder would produce a watery stool, something that lasted at least a week every time it happened. When this condition occurred, even a light vegetable soup made things worse. Because of my weakened body, I frequently had to stay home and miss school.

Gradually I began to notice many of my dear sweet childhood memories had been erased by the explosion. A sort of amnesia had set in. The malignant effects of the bomb lasted long beyond that fateful day in August 1945. They have in fact lasted all my life. But I have to stop my story here, at a point where even greater pain begins.

The names of all those who perished in the catastrophe of 1945 are listed on a stone monument. Also inscribed is the following prayer: Yasuraka-ni nemutte kudasai, ayamachi-wa kurikaeshimasen-kara. "Repose ye in peace, that the error shall never be repeated. Repose ye in peace, that the error shall never be repeated." ■

Contributors' Notes

Akio Inoue, born in Hiroshima, Japan, on May 25, 1929, was almost killed as a sixteen year old boy by the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. In 1960 he settled in the Chicago area where he eventually became a senior staff systems analyst for Amoco Corporation. Later he attended Governors State University and graduated with an MA in English Literature. He now lives in Minnesota, where he translates Japanese poetry and the lyrics to old songs. Inoue received editorial assistance for his essay from **Lawrence Farrar**, a former U.S. diplomat in Japan.