

Interview The Bomb Is Still Exploding

Miyoko Matsubara is a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing who has made it her life's work to share her story and speak for nuclear abolition. Jeff Farr, World Tribune associate editor, spoke with her when she visited Soka University of America, Calabasas, Calif., Oct. 20.

JF: Many Americans, when they think of the Hiroshima bombing, don't think of its long-term effects on survivors. I understand that you lost three family members to radiation sickness years after the bombing. And for you, in a sense, the bomb is still exploding.

MATSUBARA: When I was in Germany, on my way here, many people asked about my health. In 1988 I had to take five months sick leave for breast surgery. I may look fine and healthy, but my old wounds still hurt — all the time. Last year I had to go into the hospital twice to have polyps in my stomach checked. I don't think I'll live much longer.

The Hiroshima atomic bomb weighed only one kilogram, the same as 15 eggs. And it instantly killed 140,000 people. This figure was reported by the Hiroshima City Office to the United Nations in 1976. But this was a rough estimation; we still don't have an exact number and never will.

The effect of the bomb came in three parts. Thirty-five percent was in the form of heat rays, 50 percent as blast winds and 15 percent as radiation.

The radiation remained in our bodies. Twenty minutes after the blast, the black rain started, containing the radiation. It was a heavy rain, and Hiroshima, which was on fire, was cooled down. The black rain remains in our bodies today in the form of radiation sickness.

JF: I heard that when the bombing happened you were 12.

MATSUBARA: Yes — almost 13. I was mobilized to the center of Hiroshima city, less than a mile from the target. During the war, every student had to, as you know, work for the government.

I was watching the airplane at that moment, so both hands were protecting my eyes and face. If I hadn't been holding both hands in front of my face, I would have lost my eyesight. Eight years later, when I was 21, I had plastic surgery 12 times. As a result, my eyelids could open and close. Until then, they were permanently open from the bombing. So, I was watching the bomb — I saw it. Then I saw a huge fire drop from the tails of the plane. I fell to the ground. At the same time I heard a deafening roar, which must have reached the bowels of the earth. What occurred to me was that the plane had aimed at me.

When I regained consciousness, I had been blown five meters from where I had stood. Immediately, I wanted to cover my face — the smell was so terrible. I took a towel I had at my waist and covered my face, but when I tried to remove it, the skin on my face peeled off. Then I found the skin on my hands and legs was also peeling off. All that was left of my jacket was the upper part around my breast. My work trousers were gone, leaving only the waistband. Only my white underwear was left. As you know, black absorbs heat rays and white reflects them. Without my underwear, my whole body would have been completely burned.

I started to head back to my school. At a bridge I had to cross, many people were crying and shouting. Raising their arms in front of their chests, they cried: "Help me! Help me!" In

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the river, countless dead bodies were carried away on the current. Some sinking. Some floating. Some bodies had been thrown against the riverside and bridge. Their intestines had exploded.

Well, I jumped into the water, because I was unbearably hot. Then someone called my name: “Miyoko? Miyoko?” But I couldn’t recognize who was speaking to me. “I am Michiko,” she said. My friend’s facial features — eyes, mouth and teeth — were reduced to a pulp. Together we climbed up the other side of the river bank and headed toward school.

But I had to say goodbye to Michiko before we got there. We were unbearably hot, and she said: “Give me water. I am so thirsty.”

But I said: “No. Everyone’s at school, so we should go.”

She said: “I cannot go any farther. Leave me. Leave me, and tell them I am here. Tell my teacher I am here.” Even though she said, “Please go away, go away,” she pleaded with her eyes for me to take her with me. I had to say goodbye because big flames were coming. Three days later, her parents found out that she died.

Then the black rain started, for two or three hours in some places. I couldn’t move. I was on the ground in the rain. And finally, when the rain finished, I rested under a tree. It was then that my neighbor came, looking for her daughter. I called to her. She was surprised. “Heh? Aren’t you Miyoko?” she asked. She decided to save me instead of looking for her own daughter. She never found her daughter.

JF: You must have hated America.

MATSUBARA: At first I blamed America. When I graduated from high school, no one would give me a job because of my face. Sometimes I thought about committing suicide. Sometimes people wouldn’t even sit next to me — they were afraid to catch radiation from my body. No one wanted to marry me! They were afraid of having deformed babies. I was so unhappy. And I never married.

One day a friend said, “Miyoko, shall we go to church?” So I started going to church. The members of my church eventually invited us to Osaka for plastic surgery. So, when I was 21, I went to Osaka and had the 12 operations, which took seven months.

In 1955, I also had the chance to come to America for plastic surgery, but I didn’t join the program. Twenty-five young women from Hiroshima came to the United States for a few years to have surgery at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. I couldn’t do it because of what America had done.

Of those 25, only one became a storyteller. They don’t like to talk about the Hiroshima bombing. They don’t want to reveal their wounds to the public.

But I decided to be a storyteller. I went around the world telling my story. I was chosen to represent Hiroshima survivors at the United Nations. I came to the United States, I told my story, and I met Americans who showed me great sympathy. “Why are they so kind?” I wondered. Anyhow, I realized that if Japan had had the nuclear weapon, Japan might have used it. So, I do not hate Americans but war and those nuclear weapons.

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MIYOKO MATSUBARA’S MESSAGE TO SGI-USA MEMBERS

In July 1996, the International Court of Justice in the Hague announced its advisory opinion as follows: “The threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law.”

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In September of the same year, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and in December, it announced the adoption of a resolution to conclude the Treaty of the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. A wave of support for nuclear abolition has been dramatically growing in international society. A time like this provides us the opportunity to raise once again the question, “Are nuclear weapons necessary?”

In this respect, Daisaku Ikeda, president of the SGI, has said: “A revolution within the lives of people is the only path to the abolition of nuclear weapons. And nations should never base their own security and welfare on the people of other nations.”

Mr. Ikeda stated further that unless we set the revolution of human life in motion, human beings will never free ourselves from adherence to nuclear weapons.

Josei Toda, second president of the Soka Gakkai, stated in his Declaration for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons that atomic and hydrogen bombs are absolute evils. The existence of nuclear weapons itself is an immeasurable threat to precious human lives, he said.

Mr. Toda thus singled out the evil spirit which is behind the desire to possess nuclear weapons. Striving to eradicate this evil in accordance with his mentor’s declaration, Mr. Ikeda continues to speak out and take action toward that end.

Finally, we have to consider what we ourselves can do to eliminate nuclear weapons at the level of common citizens and take action toward the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world. So, everyone, please join me in building a solidarity of friendship and dedication to the creation of a peaceful world. Thank you very much.

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