

AKIHIRO TAKAHASHI

Memory of Hiroshima, 1945/1986

The author of this selection, Akihiro Takahashi, was fourteen years old on August 6, 1945, when the United States bombed Hiroshima. He was standing in line with other students in the courtyard of the Hiroshima Municipal Junior High School. His and other survivors' recollections of that day and its aftermath were recorded, transcribed, and translated some forty years later by a Japanese peace project called "The Voice of Hibakusha."¹ How do you weigh the experience of Akihiro Takahashi against the reasons given by President Truman for dropping the bomb?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

One of the difficulties in thinking about the unthinkable is remembering the details we want to forget. Trauma victims often repress memories that are too painful to bear. In some cases time revives memories as well as heals. Akihiro Takahashi's recollections display both a prodigious and courageous memory. How might this process of remembering and telling be helpful to him? How might it be helpful to others?

... [W]e saw a B-29 approaching and about fly over us. All of us were looking up the sky, pointing out the aircraft. Then the teachers came out from the school building and the class leaders gave the command to fall in. Our faces were all shifted from the direction of the sky to that of the platform. That was the moment when the blast came. And then the tremendous noise came and we were left in the dark. I couldn't see anything at the moment of explosion just like in this picture. We had been blown by the blast. Of course, I couldn't realize this until the darkness disappeared. I was actually blown about 10 m. My friends were all marked down on the ground by the blast just like this. Everything collapsed for as far as I could see. I felt the city of Hiroshima had disappeared all of a sudden. Then I looked at myself and found my clothes had turned into rags due to the heat. I was probably burned at the back of the head, on my back, on both arms and both legs. My skin was peeling and hanging like this. Automatically I began to walk heading west

¹ Japanese term for the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: literally, the "explosion-affected people."

because that was the direction of my home. After a while, I noticed somebody calling my name. I looked around and found a friend of mine who lived in my town and was studying at the same school. His name was Yamamoto. He was badly burnt just like myself. We walked toward the river. And on the way we saw many victims. I saw a man whose skin was completely peeled off the upper half of his body and a woman whose eye balls were sticking out. Her whole body was bleeding. A mother and her baby were lying with a skin completely peeled off. We desperately made away crawling. And finally we reached the river bank. At the same moment, a fire broke out. We made a narrow escape from the fire. If we had been slower by even one second, we would have been killed by the fire. Fire was blowing into the sky, becoming 4 or even 5 m high. There was a small wooden bridge left, which had not been destroyed by the blast. I went over to the other side of the river using that bridge. But Yamamoto was not with me any more. He was lost somewhere. I remember I crossed the river by myself and on the other side, I purged myself into the water three times. The heat was tremendous. And I felt like my body was burning all over. For my burning body the cold water of the river was as precious as a treasure. Then I left the river, and I walked along the railroad tracks in the direction of my home. On the way, I ran into another friend of mine, Tokujiro Hatta. I wondered why the soles of his feet were badly burnt. It was unthinkable to get burned there. But it was an undeniable fact that the soles were peeling and red muscle was exposed. Even though I myself was terribly burnt, I could not go home ignoring him. I made him crawl using his arms and knees. Next, I made him stand on his heels and I supported him. We walked heading toward my home repeating the two methods. When we were resting because we were so exhausted, I found my grandfather's brother and his wife, in other words, great uncle and great aunt, coming toward us. That was quite a coincidence. As you know, we have a proverb about meeting Buddha in Hell. My encounter with my relatives at that time was just like that. They seemed to be the Buddha to me wandering in the living hell.

Afterwards I was under medical treatment for one year and half and I miraculously recovered. Out of sixty junior high school classmates, only ten of us are alive today. Yamamoto and Hatta soon died from the acute radiation disease. The radiation corroded their bodies and killed them. I myself am still alive on this earth suffering after-effects of the bomb. I have to see regularly an ear doctor, an eye doctor, a dermatologist and a surgeon. I feel uneasy about my health every day. Further, on both of my hands, I have keloids.² My injury was most serious on my right hand and I used to have terrible keloids right here. I had them removed by surgery in 1954, which enabled me to move my wrist a little

² Scars. [Ed.]

like this. For my four fingers are fixed just like this, and my elbow is fixed at one hundred twenty degrees and doesn't move. The muscle and bones are attached [to] each other. Also the fourth finger of my right hand doesn't have a normal nail. It has a black nail. A piece of glass which was blown by the blast stuck here and destroyed the cells of the bone of the finger. That is why a black nail continues to grow and from now on, too, it will continue to be black and never become normal. Anyway I'm alive today together with nine of my classmates for this thirty years. I've been living believing that we can never waste the deaths of the victims. I've been living on, dragging my body full of sickness, and from time to time I question myself; I wonder if it is worth living in such hardship and pain and I become desperate. But it's time I manage to pull myself together and I tell myself once my life was saved, I should fulfill my mission as a survivor; in other words, it has been and it is my belief that those who survived must continue to talk about our experiences. To hand down the awful memories to future generations representing the silent voices of those who had to die in misery. Throughout my life, I would like to fulfill this mission by talking about my experience both here in Japan and overseas.

REFLECTIONS

Since the end of war, the world community has adopted three strategies to counter genocide and the mass killing of civilians. The first is the trial of war criminals. At the conclusion of World War II, the victorious Allies conducted war-crime trials of leading Nazi and Japanese officials. Twelve high Nazi officials and seven Japanese leaders, including Iwane Matsui for the "Rape of Nanking," were sentenced to death. Many others served prison sentences. Critics argued that some of the alleged crimes ("wars of aggression" and "crimes against peace") were vague and that the victorious Allies might be guilty of these as well. Other charges—specifically "war crimes" and "crimes against humanity"—were devised as a response to the trials, an *ex post facto* (after the fact) violation of standard procedure where prosecution must be based on criminal statutes.

The problem was that the technology and practice of warfare had long outrun international agreements. The first Geneva Conventions, dating from 1864, were mainly concerned with the treatment of the wounded and prisoners. Therefore, the second strategy was developing and refining international laws regarding human rights and the protection of civilians. In 1948, the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" adopted by the United Nations, itself a shaper and guardian of international law, offered a recognized standard and continuing process for stopping and preventing genocide, mass murder, and "crimes against