



Sachiko Masuoka Yuki Miyamoto

Ms. Sachiko Masuoka is a petite woman, barely 5 feet tall, with a friendly smile and vibrant sense of humor. She is grateful for so many aspects of her life — family, the people around her — and is in the habit of saying, “thank you.” Meeting Ms. Masuoka, it is hard to imagine what she went through 63 years ago, at the age of 18.

Exactly 63 years ago today, on the morning of August 6, Ms. Masuoka was just over 2 miles from the hypocenter of the explosion. She had been looking up at the sky, following the airplanes flying over her, when the atomic bomb detonated. She remembers the intense flash and the feeling of the heat on her cheeks. Fortunately, she did not receive any external injuries, but she witnessed many horrors that day:

“There were so many people lying on the ground, covering the street. Even among those who were barely walking...some had burned clothes on, most were naked. There were also those whose eyes had been blown out of their sockets by the bomb blast. The rivers running through the city were also filled with corpses; many of them were those who had jumped into the river to escape from the fire, or to cool down their burns, only to drown.”

Ms. Masuoka lost her little sister and little brother to the bomb. Her mother had been miraculously reunited with this younger daughter shortly after the bombing, and told Ms. Masuoka about the last day of her sister’s life. Her school was much closer to the hypocenter than Ms. Masuoka’s, and due to the intense heat from the bomb, her clothes were burnt off in an instant. Her back was to the explosion, and although her face was left intact, her entire body was severely burnt. Her mother managed to bring her to a triage camp where a number of people whose skin had been melted off from the heat cried out for their families. They also cried out due to their pains and chills; Ms. Masuoka later learned that when human bodies have lost their skin, they feel only chills. However, her sister reported feeling no pain and no chills. Mrs. Masuoka speculates that her nerves must have been overwhelmed by the intensity of the burn.

The bodies of those who died in the triage center or which were gathered from the streets were all piled up on the ground and burned with gasoline. There were many such piles of corpses throughout the city.

Ms. Masuoka was unable to make it to her little sister’s deathbed. A week after the bombing, she found her little brother’s body. “My six-year-old brother was assumed to be crushed under our burned home. Although it was the first time for me to see a charred body, it was not shocking. I was only glad to be able to find my brother’s body.” Ms. Masuoka was able to identify the completely blackened body of her brother by the tiny pieces of cloth that remained undamaged and attached to his body; they were the same pattern as the shirt her brother had been wearing on the morning of August 6. It was his favorite shirt.

MESSAGE FROM A SURVIVOR ON THE 63RD ANNIVERSARY OF THE ATOMIC BOMBINGS

Ms. Masuoka came to the U.S. in 1962, soon after having married a Nisei Japanese American (the second-generation of Japanese immigrants). One of the questions most frequently asked of her and other survivors is whether she is angry at Americans. “I never felt the bombing was America’s fault,” says Ms. Masuoka, “but the war is to be blamed.” She recalled that on the day of the bombing Japan’s military headquarters announced the possibility of considerable damage by a special bomb. “I thought that Japan would be completely destroyed if several more bombs were to be dropped. I didn’t mind my country losing the war, but I was really hoping it would be over soon.”

Having lived in the grip of fear of a nuclear attack, Ms. Masuoka stresses not only the importance of the elimination of nuclear weapons, but the elimination of war and conflicts altogether. “We should not emphasize the abolition of nuclear arsenals alone. People are dying in Iraq without using nuclear weapons. Even if we reach the disarmament of nuclear weaponry, people will never stop wars.” “Degree of damage,” continues Ms. Masuoka, “does not matter. If anyone loses only one family member rather than two or more, it is a tragedy for those who are left behind.”

Having myself grown up as a daughter of a survivor in Hiroshima, I have learned that Ms. Masuoka’s statement represents the mindset of the survivors. Most of them are self-critical about the war in which they had been involved, and try to avoid perpetuating a “victim” narrative. On the contrary, they extend their concerns to all people, and continue to voice their anti-war and anti-nuclear weaponry positions. The survivors do not hold grudges against Americans, and this is thanks in part to the awareness of their own government’s participation in the war, and also to the knowledge of the indiscriminate nature of nuclear weaponry: When the bomb is detonated, there is no distinction between Americans and Japanese. Indeed, the victims of 1945’s bombings include Koreans, Chinese, Japanese-Americans, American POWs, and Dutch POWs, among others. In addition, when 30,000 nuclear warheads are deployed over the planet and over 2,000 nuclear tests have been conducted in the air, under water, and beneath the ground, who is not a victim?

If survivors can overcome their hardships and continuously work for the abolition of nuclear weaponry, and ultimately any conflict, through their convictions that no one should have to endure what they experienced, how should we respond to their call? At least on the anniversary of the bombings, we may want to take time to consider the horror of nuclear weaponry, and despite its dreadfulness, to ponder our shared reality in living under its threat. We should reflect on urgent questions: What prevents us from knowing the full extent of the destruction wrought by the atomic bombs 63 years ago? How many nuclear tests have been conducted since 1945? How many nuclear warheads exist, and where are they located? What could justify having these weapons at all? Confronting these questions may be the only way for us to respond to the survivors’ plea.