

## *A Korean in Hiroshima*

SHIN BOK SU

*Korea House, an office building in the center of the city, is where she wishes to meet. Her accent is rich in the flavors and vocabulary of Hiroshima. Tears occasionally well up in her eyes as she speaks. Her present husband has been hospitalized for about a year. He was also in Hiroshima on that day.*

*The number of non-Japanese who became victims of the atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki is extremely difficult to determine.† But careful estimates indicate that about 50,000 Koreans were exposed to the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Approximately 30,000 were killed. Of the 20,000 survivors, all but 5,000 were repatriated to Korea after Korean*

---

\* Norman Cousins, longtime editor of *Saturday Review*, is widely known in Japan for his work in support of the victims of the atomic bombs and other work for the promotion of peace.

† One of the best discussions of the problems encountered in the non-Japanese population is to be found in The Committee for the Compilation of Materials on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Physical, Medical, and Social Effects of the Atomic Bombings* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), a translation of *Hiroshima no genbaku saigai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1979), pp. 461-83. The best numbers available are for the Koreans.

*independence. Chinese, from both Taiwan and the continent, people from elsewhere in Asia, Allied prisoners of war, and Japanese-Americans caught in Japan by the onset of war also became hibakusha.*

It was the time of the "unification" of Japan and Korea. Mr. Minami, the governor general, addressing us, said we were now all Japanese. All of us Koreans were suddenly told to change our names. We adopted a Japanese name, Shigemitsu. The characters meant "thickly-wooded," because our family had been living on a heavily wooded mountain. A new school was founded about four kilometers from our village of two hundred and fifty people. I wanted to go. My parents opposed it since they thought it would be too dangerous for a girl. I beseeched Grandpa and finally he relented, so I became a first-grader at the age of ten.

Seven of the ten teachers were Japanese. Korean kids, even when they wanted to go weewee, didn't know how to say that in Japanese. So some kids ended up wetting themselves. But still, when at that school, I felt we had become Japanese. Many Japanese people came to Korea. There were money-lenders, real usurers who lent money at outrageous rates, and when they weren't repaid immediately, took away people's fields and became rich. They had bathtubs in their own homes! Lived in luxury.

Conversations about marriage came up when I was about twenty-three years old and working in an agricultural laboratory. I yearned for Japan. At that time the Japanese were gods. Their authority was overwhelming. When we met Japanese we bowed to them. My husband-to-be came back to Korea from Japan for our *o-miai*, our first meeting. I agreed to it. In three days we were married. He was just an ordinary Korean, a simple, straightforward person. That's how I came to Hiroshima in 1937.

I'd believed that Koreans were living the good life in Japan, but that didn't seem to be the case. But my husband was a subcontractor, part of a subsidiary of Mitsubishi which was using Korean labor. I didn't have to worry. We were able to eat white rice. We had cash too. I was quite happy I'd come to Japan. He bought me my first Western dress a week after we arrived. He was one of the leaders of the Kyōwakai, a Korean people's group. I asked him to arrange for a Korean Women's Kyōwakai. He got the needed permission, and when it opened, all the big shots from the city came. Thought it was a great idea. I became its head. We did volunteer work and also civil-defense and air-defense training. I was occupied from morning to night.

We ate breakfast about seven forty that morning when the atomic bomb fell. Then a warning of an imminent air attack sounded. My

seven-year-old son warned my husband's mother, who lived with us, "Grandma, take care. Hurry, or you'll die." "Don't worry about me," she answered, "I run well. I'm fine." With this kind of banter we entered the shelter in our backyard. We all had our headgear on. We left the radio on loud until we heard that the skies over Hiroshima were all clear. Then we came out, removed our headgear, and stripped off our outer clothes, down to our underwear. It was so hot in Hiroshima. I took off the baby's diaper cover. Grandma wore only a band around her waist. She put the youngest on her back, tied on with a sash—he was thirteen months old—and went into the kitchen to wash the morning dishes. The other two children were sleepy because air raid warnings the night before had kept them awake. So I told them to nap awhile, and put out their futon. I hung the mosquito net for them in the six-mat room. From our window I noticed the cistern water was low, so I ran a hose out from our bathtub to fill it up.

Suddenly, "PIKA!" a brilliant light and then "DON!" a gigantic noise. I looked up. But I couldn't see anything. It was pitch black. I heard Grandma's voice shouting. "Help, help!" "Where are you?" I called. "I'm in the living room. I'm suffocating!"

Gradually, the darkness lightened. I saw that Grandma was on top of the child. Two pillars of the house had fallen on her neck and legs. I looked around and there were no houses to be seen. This can't be a bomb, I thought. I pulled at the pillars, but couldn't lift them off her. They didn't even budge. I shouted to our neighbor, "Help, my child's buried under the house!" He jumped over the ruins of his own house and tried to pull them out. He couldn't move a thing. "I'm sorry," he said, "My grandfather is trapped in the second-floor room. I have to rescue him."

Then Mr. Ishihara, our other neighbor, bleeding himself, gave me a knife with the handle missing. "Mrs. Hirota," he said—that was my Japanese name then—"cut the sash off with this." I ran to them, cut the sash with the kitchen knife, and pulled the baby boy out. The flesh on his left leg was torn. Somehow, with both of us tugging, Grandma managed to wriggle free herself. It took more than an hour and a half. Then Grandma started to run away. She was thinking only of herself! I shouted at her, "Take the baby with you," but she didn't listen. I chased her and caught her. There was a millet field nearby where we grew vegetables because of the food shortage. I got her to sit down and hold the baby in her arms. Then I ran back to the house for the other children.

Where were the children sleeping? Our house was quite large. They had been in the middle. The fire-prevention cistern was still there, so I used that as a point of reference and started digging through the roof

tiles. One by one. I shouted, "Takeo! Akiko! Come out!" But I heard no response. I kept pulling off tiles. I heard the droning sound of an airplane! But I no longer cared if I died right there. I just kept digging. Soon it started raining. That was the Black Rain.

My husband returned about the time things started burning. That morning he'd gone to visit someone in the city. He was in a toilet and was buried there. He came back wearing only his shorts. His whole body was covered completely in black soot. I couldn't tell who he was until he said something to me. I cried to him that the kids were still under the house.

The flames were starting to break out from the rubble. He found a straw mat and soaked that in water. He walked over the roof tiles. That straw mat caught on fire while he was trying to move aside as many tiles as he could. A soldier came and insisted that we flee. We were both dragged away. That night we stayed at a city sports ground. All night long people were dying off all around us.

The next morning, we went back to find out what happened to our children. The house had burned completely. All our household goods, so carefully piled up for evacuation, and some rationed food we'd accumulated were still burning. So were the corpses of my children. When I approached, I saw a line of buttons from my son's white shirt. Akiko, my girl, was curled up next to Takeo. Flames were still licking up from them.

I couldn't walk anymore. Pieces of the house were imbedded in my back, and I'd been rushing around so desperately that I'd injured my legs. One of my husband's men took me in a cart to get some medicine. Along the street, I saw men and women all red, burned, someone still wearing a soldier's cap but with a body all scorched. You couldn't tell men from women. If there were breasts, that was a woman. Faces hung down like icicles. Skin in strips from arms held out in front of them. "Water! Water!" You couldn't walk the streets without stepping over the dead. I saw girl students, all dead, their heads in a water cistern. It must have been hot.

About a week later, we were notified that we should come to school to pick up the remains of our children about a week later. There we were given two yellow envelopes. When we opened them, my husband said, "These are from the backbones of adults." Our kids were seven and four. So we released those bones into the river.

My husband had only gotten a small scrape on his knee. I thought we were lucky. But from the twenty-fifth of August his hair started falling out. He went to the hospital and got some medicine, but his mouth turned black. He swore he'd die if he stayed there, cried "I have to go to Tokyo. I must get medicine!" He ran off to a train station. I put my baby on my back and followed him. I just left Grandma there. They'd both

made it. We jumped on a freight train packed with soldiers and we reached Osaka that night. He looked as if he were going to die right then. A train heading away from Tokyo came by. I lied to him. I said that it was bound for Tokyo and I took him back to Hiroshima. The next morning he died. His body had turned black. Blood seeped from his skin. He smelled awful.

By then, we were living on the one rice ball a day they brought on a truck. A month passed before the wife of a neighbor told me that if you went to city hall, they'd give you money for the ones who'd died of the atomic bomb. That was good news. I went to the city office. The clerk gave me a form to fill out. I put down our names and place of family registration. "You're a foreigner," he said. Until that moment I'd been Japanese. All I'd done was say my registration was in Korea. "We cannot give anything to Koreans," he replied. "Why?" I asked him. My husband and two children had died because we were Japanese. Who had suddenly decided we were aliens? "I don't know," he said. "The orders came from above."