

“I learned about the war from Grandma.”

MIYAGI HARUMI

She has just completed compiling a history of Zamami during the Battle of Okinawa. The island lies twenty-two miles west of Naha City, in the Kerama Archipelago, where U.S. forces landed March 26, 1945, in the opening phase of the Okinawa operation. The island had a population of roughly 700 to 800 then. Its principal industries were fishing for tuna and a little agriculture. Total civilian casualties were 358, including 171 in “group suicide.”

It was my grandmother, not my mother, who kindled my interest in the war. My mother only talked about the war, but my grandmother’s neck had a hole in it. I wondered where it had come from. The island I come from is quite small. My aunt had a scar on her throat and others did, too. Only my grandmother had a large opening. I don’t remember exactly how old I was when I first became aware of that hole, but as a child I assumed that in war everyone had their neck cut.

There was an old man in the village we used to call Murderer! Whenever he appeared, the village children used him to play a kind of

tag, and when he came too near, all of us kids would run away. Later on, I learned that he had killed his whole family in one of those caves where Okinawans took shelter during the invasion. They asked him to kill them. At first, according to those who survived, he refused, tears streaming down his cheeks. But no one else had enough strength, so he killed his own children, grandchildren, everyone. Another old man who was there did the same. Then he asked this other man to kill him, but he wouldn’t do it. He’d promised his grandsons he would follow them, so he tried to hang himself from a rope tied to a makeshift wooden beam that served to keep the cave’s ceiling from collapsing. Many old men killed themselves this way, after they’d killed their families. But all we village children heard was “Murderer. He’s nothing but a murderer.”

My grandmother was very cold to my grandfather. She hardly ever talked to him. When she did, it was in a defiant way. I simply assumed he was a henpecked husband. However, that wasn’t the case. She blamed him for killing his own son. In reality, she was the one who had been alarmed and had screamed, “Kill us! Kill us!” when the American forces appeared in front of their cave. She was an accomplice in the act. However, the fact that her son had died, and that her own neck had an opening, seemed to be the only things still in her mind. Grandfather had a scar on his neck, too, from where he’d tried to kill himself. I used to think Grandfather was just an extremely gentle man, but after I learned the whole situation, I realized it wasn’t that simple.

First, my grandmother panicked and asked to be killed quickly. Grandfather hurriedly tried to strangle her with a rope, but failed. He hadn’t the strength to wring the life out of her. Then he decided to use a blade. You know the kind of razor used in barbershops? My grandfather carried one with him because he hated to have any beard growing on his face. I remember him shaving twice or three times a day when I was a child. He carried it everywhere. With that razor, I was told, he’d cut my grandmother’s throat. It still wasn’t enough to kill her. She couldn’t die and cried out to him to cut with more force. He did—many, many times. Next was their son, who said just one word, “Father,” and died.

They had two daughters. One of them was my mother. She was away with the mayor, helping the soldiers as a leader of the women’s youth group. The younger one was left there in the cave, presumed dead. That’s my aunt. She later told me she noticed noises around her, regained consciousness, and opened her eyes. An American soldier was looking down at her. Their eyes accidentally met. She was shocked and closed hers in a hurry. But the American soldier poked at her eyes to get her to open them. She tried not to breathe, but it was impossible, as you can imagine. He carried her out of the cave. She was eighteen years old at

the time, old enough to remember most of the things that had taken place in the cave. She said she didn't feel any pain when her throat was slashed. The blood just gushed out and her body got warm. Then she grew sleepy. It was a sea of blood. Everyone was bathed in the blood of others. For a while, when I was first eager to learn of these stories, she used to tell me, but she won't talk to me about it anymore. I wonder why? She stopped telling me after my grandmother died last year. Aunt used to say that she had those horrifying experiences because her mother was the way she was. I sensed she blamed her. Perhaps telling the stories after her mother's death seemed meaningless.

When Grandmother died, it wasn't of illness. She had a tube in her trachea in order to breathe. Her mouth was just for eating. When she spoke, she breathed the words out of the middle of her throat. Her mouth merely moved, voicelessly. Only those who were used to hearing her talk could understand what she said. The metal tube, placed in her throat by the U.S. forces during the war, remained there for forty-odd postwar years until it gradually started to disintegrate. I guess that was to be expected. The tube was replaced by one made in Japan. The new one was plastic, and it caused an inflammation. The doctors then ordered a special metal tube, but it didn't fit well. One time when it was forced in, blood filled the hole and she died of suffocation, although she was in good health.

I heard nothing about the war from her. Honestly, nothing. Only once did I ask her. She began by saying, "To tell the truth, I wanted to die! But they wouldn't let me die." She told me she wanted to apologize to her son, to die quickly and go to the place where her son is. Grandmother blamed herself for killing him. I couldn't ask more. Grandfather died about the time I entered university. I wasn't interested in the war as much then as I am now. I don't think I would be able to ask him, anyway, even if he were still alive.

Everyone used to believe that the troop commander issued an order for the killings to begin, but that order, in fact, came from men of importance within our village. A runner made the rounds of the caves and conveyed the message that all should gather in front of the monument to the war dead. Everyone assumed then that they were to kill themselves, even though there'd not been any prior arrangement or plan. It had never been decided that gathering in front of the memorial meant that. A message to gather didn't amount to an order to commit "group suicide," you know. Yet everyone knew intuitively what they were supposed to do. In a great hurry they began to "dress for death." They dressed their children in their best clothes. They ate all their remaining

food. They left the caves in the midst of a late-night naval bombardment and made their way to the monument.

The site of the monument was totally unsafe. It was an open space, built for the ceremonies tied up with the twenty-six hundredth anniversary of national foundation in 1940. There, on the eighth day of every month, they prayed for success in war and sang the national anthem as the flag was raised. Gathering there meant a lot. The villagers assembled in small clusters that night. But the severity of the bombardment soon scattered everyone. Although everyone went there with the intention to die, they were unable to carry out the act. The next morning the Americans landed.

It was March 26, 1945, the Americans landed on Zamami Island. The tension in the air was unbearable at the moment the villagers actually saw American soldiers coming ashore for the first time. It was like a hair-trigger—one touch and it exploded. The villagers had received an education in not disgracing themselves as Japanese. That education centered on the Emperor and was pounded into them. "Don't use your own local dialect!" "Don't value Okinawan culture!" "Try to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Japanese!" This penetrated to the depths of their hearts. It was a familial education that taught that the people were the Emperor's children. This had to be stressed over and over again in Okinawa, where there had never been such a tradition. And what were they told would happen if they were caught by American soldiers? The veterans, those who'd been to China, taught the villagers what would happen if you were captured. They used things like the Nanking massacre as examples. "Japanese did things like this," they'd say. "The Americans naturally will do the same things." It's better to kill your children first and die by your own hand than be shamed and abused, disgraced and raped.

Although I was born after the war, I still feel like I'm dragging it along with me. Even some of the villagers have the impression that I lived through the war, maybe because I'm doing this kind of work. They say things like, "The Americans came like this, and we escaped. Don't you remember?"

I've interviewed many people on Zamami. When strangers go to the island, the villagers are on their guard, tight-lipped in their responses. They feel they have no control over how their answers might be used and they're worried about speaking their minds. That such deeply shameful events took place among blood relatives keeps them from talking. Moreover, all they can seem to do is blame themselves, or people already dead. There's nothing that can be done about it now.

People trust my mother. That's really helped me. She was twenty-four years old, a leader of the wartime women's youth group. Immediately after the end of the war, Mother started gathering the remains of those who had died. She organized a youth group that helped distribute what supplies they received from the Americans. During the war her group helped carry ammunition for the military at the request of the village mayor and deputy mayor. Then she and her friends prepared for their deaths and tried to kill themselves with hand grenades, but they wouldn't explode. My mother and the three most important men in the village—the mayor, deputy mayor, and school principal—went to the garrison commander to request an ammunition magazine so that they and the other villagers could kill themselves. They were turned down. "Go home," was all the garrison commander said. Perhaps it was after this that the village leaders issued that order for everybody to gather in front of the war monument. Who knows? They're all dead now, except my mother. If that commander had issued an order for group suicide I would at least feel that he had given some thought to the fate of the villagers, but even that wasn't the case.

This became clear to me when the garrison commander returned, in secret, for a visit a few years ago. In fact, I'm the one who invited him. I suggested he should meet with the villagers and speak with them about those days, if he had something important to say. He wrote to me under an assumed name and came to Okinawa. I accompanied him to Zamami Island. Mother volunteered to guide him. He wanted to see where his men had died. Whenever my mother said "A soldier died here," he immediately asked to stop the car and got out to comb through the underbrush and rocks for any sign of the lost man. He would then bring his hands together, bow his head in prayer, and sob.

"Fifty-nine villagers died here, including the village notables—the mayor, deputy mayor, and school principal," Mother said as she pointed out a monument which has been erected in their memory. "Is that so?" was his only comment. It was such a minimal response. I was shocked. "OK," he finally said, "let's get out and lay some flowers here, too." I was so surprised, I couldn't believe it. How could he take the news so lightly? Truly, fifty-nine villagers had *died*. Fifty-nine *people* had died there. And others, too, whole families together—mothers, fathers, children. He wasn't even remotely moved by that. Nothing could have convinced me more that such a man wouldn't have thought to issue an order for the villagers to kill themselves. The military were only concerned with their own units, their own commands.

On the boat back to Naha, I brought out a book of photographs by Professor Ōta Masahide called *This Is the Battle of Okinawa*. I asked the

commander if he'd like to read it. "No! I don't even want to see it! I don't want to think about lost battles." He really said that! I was quiet afterwards, thinking that something I said might have been wrong. When the boat pulled into the harbor, I asked, "Are you going to visit the Southern Battlefields?" "No," he replied. "That's just the symbol of a lost war. I'm going to visit the American airbase at Kadena. I want to make sure with my own eyes that Japan's security is being guaranteed." I said to myself, "This must be what a military man was like." Nothing had changed in his mind since the war.

When I was in elementary school, new houses sprang up everywhere on our island. The money to build them came from the postwar reconstruction funds. You could borrow money at low interest rates. Most of the families put up pictures of the then Crown Prince and Princess. They said the people who *caused* the war were the bad ones, not the Emperor. Although the villagers criticize the war, they don't know where to assign the blame. They can't bear to put it on the Emperor, so it is directed elsewhere. They say, "That old man was a murderer," or "That man's father did it." The islanders were grouped into the murderers and the murdered.

It's now forty-five years since the Battle of Okinawa, and Okinawa has gone through drastic changes. First, the long American Occupation—until 1971—brought in American culture. Then suddenly Okinawa went back to Japan, and again we heard that we must walk shoulder-to-shoulder with the Japanese. In addition to the rent and subsidies for the military bases here, a great deal of money is paid to Okinawans in survivors' annuities—payments to the families of the war dead. That money has been supporting our island. It's an unhealthy way of living. We are dragging along the war even now. We are living off the dead.

The Occupiers

KAWACHI UICHIRO [2]

A Yomiuri newspaperman serving at Imperial General Headquarters throughout the war, he witnessed the arrival of American forces in Tokyo after Japan's surrender.

The very day the war ended, I was switched from covering the Imperial General Headquarters to the prime minister's residence, assigned to cover the cabinet. When I walked out of the Army Ministry, smoke was rising everywhere from burning documents. I glanced at the