

Kazuhiko Futagawa

Hiroshima Survivor Interview, (Translated and Edited)

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My name is Kazuhiko Futagawa. I am one of the youngest surviving *hibakusha*. Unlike many survivors, I was not yet born when the atomic bomb was dropped. On August 6, 1945, I was two months old in my mother's womb. In Japan we call people like me *in-utero hibakusha*. I was born on April 1, 1946, eight months after the bombing. Today about 6,400 in-utero survivors are still alive. Because I was unborn at the time, I do not remember the bombing myself.

Before I tell my story, I would like to show you where these events took place. This area is the center of Hiroshima. This is today's Atomic Bomb Dome which stands today in what is now Peace Memorial Park. Before the bombing, this was a busy commercial district. Hiroshima Castle was nearby, and Hiroshima Station was located to the east. The hypocenter of the atomic bomb was only a short distance from today's Atomic Bomb Dome. The bomb exploded approximately 600 meters above it.

I grew up during Hiroshima's postwar reconstruction. I was the youngest of six children. My father worked as the postmaster of the post office located near the center of today's Peace Memorial Park. The building stood only about 300 meters from the hypocenter. My elder sister was thirteen years old at the time of the bombing. Like many students during the war, she was mobilized to help demolish buildings to create firebreaks to prevent the spread of fires during air raids. Both my father and my sister were killed by the atomic bomb.

At the time of the bombing, my mother was thirty-two years old. She was at home with her four-year-old son and one-year-old daughter. By chance, they were inside a neighbor's house when the bomb exploded. Although our house was heavily damaged, they survived.

On the morning of August 6, my father went to work as he always did. He took the train and streetcar to the post office. At 8:15 a.m., when the bomb exploded, he was probably working at the post office. The bomb detonated almost directly above there. I believe he died instantly from the blast and heat. The city was destroyed within seconds. This was the first nuclear weapon ever used against human beings.

My 13-year-old sister was also in the city center that morning. On August 6, approximately 8,400 students were working on building demolition sites in Hiroshima.

Houses were being demolished to create firebreaks. My sister was working about 800 meters south of the hypocenter. More than 6,000 students were killed or disappeared that day due to the atomic bombing. She was one of them.

At that time, Hiroshima was an important military city. Military headquarters were located in Hiroshima castle, and many military facilities were located in the city.

During the final months of the war, more than 200 Japanese cities were destroyed by air raids. Tokyo suffered terrible firebombing attacks that killed more than a hundred thousand people. Every day people lived with the fear of war.

I was born eight months after the bombing of Hiroshima. Some children who were exposed in-utero had severe disabilities, including developmental and intellectual impairments. I know people from my own generation who struggled with these conditions throughout their lives. Fortunately, I am healthy.

My mother never told me anything about what happened to her, my father, or my sister during the atomic bombing. Because my mother never spoke about her experiences, I had to piece together the story over many years.

Our house was located about 3.8 kilometers from the hypocenter. The blast damaged the house severely. Doors were blown off, windows shattered, and many parts of the structure were damaged. Somehow, the house escaped the fires that consumed so much of Hiroshima. At the moment of the bombing, my mother was with my four-year-old brother and another sister. By chance, they happened to be inside a neighbor's house, and their lives were saved.

On the day of the bombing, Hiroshima became a sea of fire. No one could enter the city center that day. My mother waited until the following morning. Then she began searching for my father and my sister. She walked through the destroyed city, moving toward the hypocenter and the areas where they had been working. As far as she could see, the city was devastated.

Eventually she traveled to Ninoshima Island, about ten kilometers from the hypocenter. Large temporary shelters and quarantine facilities had been established there by the army. Approximately, one thousand injured people were transported to the island after the bombing. Many of them died within a few days because there was little medical care available.

My mother searched for my father and my sister throughout August. She walked through what she later described as a city of death looking for them. But she never found them.

She never found their bodies. As a result of those searches, my mother herself was exposed to radiation.

After the war, she began working at my aunt's post office in the eastern part of Hiroshima. As a single mother, she worked tirelessly to raise five children. I still do not know how she managed to do it.

When I was a child, my aunt told me a story about my mother that I never forgot. One day, my mother became seriously ill and was admitted to the hospital. She was suffering from pleurisy and had a very high fever. Her condition became so severe that the doctors told my aunt there was little hope for recovery. The doctor said there was nothing more he could do.

In those days, modern medical treatments were not available as they are today. According to my aunt, my mother lay in bed burning with fever and repeatedly called out the names of her five surviving children. She said, "I cannot die yet. I cannot leave my children behind. I don't want to die." A few days later, something remarkable happened. My mother began to recover.

The doctors had expected her to die, but she survived. Afterward, she remained in surprisingly good health for the rest of her life. She rarely became ill and seemed to possess an unusual strength. To me, it felt almost like a miracle. After that experience, my mother devoted herself completely to raising her children.

She was a small woman physically, but she was incredibly strong. She worked hard every day and rarely stopped moving. I remember she always walked fast. Looking back, I sometimes wonder whether she was trying to outrun the memories of what she had experienced.

She had lost her husband. She had lost a daughter. She had searched through the ruins of Hiroshima without finding either of them. Yet she never spoke about it. She raised five children by herself in a devastated city. I still do not know how she found the strength.

Fortunately, she was not entirely alone. My aunt operated a post office in the eastern part of Hiroshima. My mother was able to find work there. My mother's older brother lived in the countryside outside the city and helped the family when he could. Those relatives became important sources of support during difficult years.

My mother never complained. She never spoke about her experiences during the atomic bombing or her hardships afterwards. Not once. I still do not know why.

She lived until 2008 and died peacefully at the age of eighty-seven after developing dementia. Throughout her life, she never told me what she had seen or what she had suffered during those days after the bombing.

Only a few years ago, my second oldest sister discovered something extraordinary. While cleaning out an old chest of drawers, she found a small blouse wrapped in white paper and hidden in the back. It had belonged to my elder sister who died in the atomic bombing. The blouse was her extra school uniform. When I saw it, I was shocked.

This was the only personal item that remained from my sister. For more than sixty years, my mother had carefully kept it hidden away. When I looked at that blouse, I felt a deep pain in my heart. Tears came to my eyes. I wondered why my mother had kept it for so long and why she had never spoken about it. When I think of her heavy silence, my heart is filled with emotion and even now, I cannot fathom why my mother didn't say anything about it. Her daughter's blouse is the only memento that remains of my sister.

Suddenly, I began to understand something I had never fully understood before. My mother had carried a deep sorrow within her for the rest of her life. Although she never spoke about the bombing, she never forgot it either. Perhaps keeping the blouse, was her way of remembering her daughter. After finding the blouse, I began to think more deeply about trauma and memory.

Later, I discussed this with a professor at Hiroshima University. She explained that people who experience overwhelming suffering sometimes suppress those memories in order to survive. They find a source of strength that allows them to continue living despite tremendous pain.

I began to believe that my mother's source of strength was her children. She had five children who depended upon her. She could not allow herself to give up. When I think about those years, I believe that raising her children gave her the courage to continue living after losing so much. That realization helped me understand my mother in a way I never had before. Her silence was not a sign that she had forgotten. It was a sign of how deeply she had suffered. Today, nearly eighty years after the atomic bombing, many survivors are still affected by its consequences.

As the number of *hibakusha* declines, many people assume that their suffering belongs entirely to the past. Yet the effects of the bombing did not end in 1945. Many survivors carried physical and emotional wounds throughout their lives. Even today, there are survivors who rarely speak about their experiences. The average age of the remaining *hibakusha* is now in the mid-eighties. Every year their numbers become smaller.

One reason many survivors remained silent was discrimination and prejudice. When I was young, my mother never applied for an Atomic Bomb Survivor's Health Handbook for her children, even though I qualified as an *in-utero hibakusha*. She did not want us to be labeled as atomic bomb survivors. At that time, being known as a *hibakusha* was not always an advantage.

Many people feared that survivors might become ill, die young, or pass health problems on to future generations. Because of these fears, some survivors experienced discrimination in employment and marriage.

When I was forty-seven years old, I finally obtained my survivor's handbook myself. By that time, many of my friends already had theirs. Fortunately, because I grew up in Hiroshima, I personally experienced very little discrimination or prejudice. Most people around me had family members or relatives who had been affected by the bombing. In Hiroshima, nearly everyone understood the reality of what had happened.

Outside Hiroshima, however, the situation was often different. I remember hearing stories about people from Hiroshima who moved elsewhere for work. When they became ill and presented their survivor's handbook at a hospital, some people reacted with suspicion or fear. There was still prejudice.

I experienced something similar when I was a university student in Tokyo. After graduation, a female friend from Tokyo called me. She told me she was planning to marry a man from Hiroshima who was a *hibakusha*. Then she asked a question that surprised me. "Is it really all right for me to marry him?" I was shocked.

For the first time, I realized that many people outside Hiroshima still viewed *hibakusha* differently. Years later, after she married, we met again in Hiroshima. She apologized for asking that question. By then she understood there had been nothing to fear. I was relieved and happy for her. These attitudes existed partly because people did not know the truth about the atomic bombing. For many years after the war, information was tightly controlled.

One of the subjects that interests me most is the press code imposed during the Allied Occupation. For approximately six and a half years after the war, criticism of the atomic bombings and discussion of their effects were heavily restricted. Newspapers, books, photographs, and other materials related to the bombings were censored. As a result, many Japanese people never learned the full truth about what had happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. People knew that a bomb had been dropped, but they did not know or understand the radiation effects, the long-term illnesses, or the suffering experienced by survivors.

My entire childhood took place during this period. Before I entered elementary school, the occupation authorities were still controlling all the information available to the public. In many ways, Hiroshima remained a hidden story. Because people did not know the truth, misunderstandings and prejudice continued.

Many people had never seen photographs of radiation burns. They had never heard survivors describe their experiences. They simply did not understand. The press code officially ended in 1952, but its effects lingered much longer.

When I later learned about other nuclear tragedies, I began to see similarities. For example, I learned that many Americans know little about Bikini Atoll and the nuclear testing conducted there. In the same way that information about Hiroshima was once suppressed, some nuclear histories remain largely unknown to the public.

When people do not know history, it becomes easier for fear, misunderstanding, and prejudice to survive. That is one reason I continue to tell my story. I believe people need to know what happened. They need to understand not only the destruction of a city, but also the human consequences, including medical and psychological, that may continue for generations.

I was deeply moved when you told me about your father and his involvement in Operation Crossroads at Bikini Atoll. He worked for an American corporation and was present when the nuclear tests known as Able and Baker were conducted in 1946. Later, he died from radiation-related illness. When I heard that story, I felt a connection.

Of course, the circumstances were different. Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffered catastrophic destruction, and more than 210,000 people were affected by the atomic bombings. Yet radiation exposure has touched many families in many places.

As you explained, two years ago you traveled to Bikini and the Marshall Islands because you wanted to understand what had happened to the Bikini people after the nuclear testing and you wanted to meet the survivors. At that time, only a few Bikini survivors were still alive. You were able to find them and to listen to their stories. If you had not found those survivors, their stories might have been forgotten.

Governments do not always remember individuals. Sometimes ordinary people must take the initiative to preserve memories and pass stories to future generations. I believe those efforts are important. When you showed me a photograph of a Bikini survivor named Rose Lewis, I looked at her face. I thought she seemed like a kind and gentle person. As we spoke, I realized that the suffering caused by nuclear weapons has extended far beyond Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In the Marshall Islands, people continue to struggle with cancer, illness, and concerns about effects passed through generations. Although the circumstances differ, there are similarities in the experiences of nuclear victims around the world.

As you were speaking about Trinity, the first nuclear test conducted in New Mexico, I was interested to learn that many people living downwind of the test site later developed cancers and other health problems. For many years, they struggled to gain recognition and assistance. When I heard that story, I thought about the similarities to the experience of *hibakusha*. In both cases, people suffered, yet many others knew little about what had happened. You described this as a kind of unofficial silence—not an official press code, but a reluctance to fully acknowledge the consequences. I understand what you mean.

For many years, people in Hiroshima also felt that their experiences were not fully understood. As our conversation continued, I became increasingly aware that nuclear history connects many different places and many different people. Hiroshima. Nagasaki. Bikini. The Marshall Islands. Trinity.

Each has its own history, but all are connected by the human consequences of nuclear weapons. This is the first time I have met an American who speaks so openly and thoughtfully about these issues. That means a great deal to me.

For me, these conversations are important because they remind us that suffering is not limited by nationality. Japanese people suffered. Marshallese people suffered. Americans suffered. People in many countries have been affected.

The important thing is not to compare suffering, but to understand it. Only by understanding can we learn from history. Today there are many wars in the world. In every war, there are aggressors and victims. Often both sides believe they are acting in the name of justice.

But I sometimes ask myself: What does justice really mean? What does it mean to protect people? I believe that wisdom, dialogue, empathy, and compassion are more important than violence. Human beings repeatedly make the same mistakes when they fail to learn from the past. That is why we must not allow memories of war and nuclear destruction to be forgotten.

There is a quotation I often remember: "If we do not end war, war will end us." Those words remain as true today as ever. When we finished discussing these subjects, you responded with something that I strongly agreed with.

You said that regardless of nationality, race, or country, we are all human beings: Japanese, Americans, Marshallese, Chinese. People everywhere. If we hurt others, we

ultimately hurt ourselves. I believe that is true. And that is one of the reasons I continue to tell my story.

As we continued talking, I reflected on the long-term effects that the atomic bombing may have had on my own family. Several members of my family later developed serious illnesses. My eldest brother died at the age of seventy-two after suffering from a rare form of cancer. Another brother died at sixty-eight. The exact cause was never completely clear, but he suffered from a severe brain infection and other medical complications. Like many *hibakusha* families, we have often wondered whether radiation exposure may have played some role in these illnesses. Even today, many questions remain unanswered. Research continues, but there is still much we do not fully understand about the long-term effects of radiation.

Here are photographs of my family taken before and after the war. One photograph shows my older brother as a small child during a traditional Shichi-Go-San celebration. Looking at the picture today, it is striking to remember how children were raised during that era. Even very young boys were taught to admire soldiers and military service. The atmosphere of the country was completely different from today. War was everywhere—in schools, in the media, and in everyday life.

Another person who became important in our family story was my elder sister's husband. He was a handsome young man and later became an elementary school teacher. During the war, however, he volunteered for a special military unit. Fortunately, he survived the war.

What happened afterward is particularly important to me. Immediately after the atomic bombing, many young soldiers and former military personnel entered Hiroshima to assist with rescue, disposal of dead bodies and recovery efforts. They carried the injured and the dead, searched for survivors, and transported victims to places such as Ninoshima Island. My sister's husband was one of those men. For most of his life, however, he never spoke about what he had seen. Twenty-five years later he died of leukemia.

In the years immediately after the war, people were focused on survival. There was little food, little money, and endless hardship. Many people felt that speaking about their experiences only reopened painful memories. As a result, countless stories remained untold.

For decades I knew almost nothing about what my sister's husband had done after the bombing. Then, only a few years ago, an important discovery was made. My niece found documents connected with his application for official *hibakusha* recognition. In those papers, he described in detail the rescue work he performed after the atomic bombing.

For the first time, our family learned exactly where he had gone and what he had done. The documents explained how he had entered the devastated city, assisted survivors, and helped transport victims to Ninoshima Island.

Reading those records was a powerful experience. I realized that, even within my own family, there were still stories waiting to be discovered. That realization reminded me of something you told me.

You explained that many years after your father's death, you discovered a large box of materials in your sister's basement. Inside were journals, letters, photographs, film, and newspaper clippings connected to his experiences at Bikini Atoll. Until then, much of that history had remained hidden. When you described opening the box and finding all of those records, I immediately understood the feeling. It was very similar to what happened in my family.

Sometimes history survives quietly in drawers, boxes, closets, and family collections. Years may pass before someone opens them and discovers what has been preserved. In both of our families, important parts of the story remained hidden for decades.

Only later did we begin to understand. That is one reason I believe it is important to record these experiences now. Every year more witnesses are lost. Every year more memories disappear. If we do not preserve these stories, future generations may never know what happened. And once those voices are gone, they can never be recovered.

As our conversation continued, we talked about the Marshallese community living in the United States and the challenges many immigrants face today. What struck me most was not politics, but the humanity. Whether in Hiroshima, the Marshall Islands, or America, ordinary people are trying to build lives, raise families, and preserve their dignity. The details may differ, but the human experience is often the same.

Looking at the photograph of Rose Lewis, the Bikini survivor, I was reminded again that suffering and kindness are not limited by nationality. Her face reminded me of people in my own family. It reminded me that we are all connected. That is why I believe it is important for people from different countries to meet and speak with one another.

When we know each other only through governments, newspapers, or history books, misunderstandings grow easily. When we sit together and share our stories, it becomes much harder to see each other as enemies. I believe these personal encounters contribute to peace.

This is another family artifact connected to my sister. As a mobilized student, she participated in wartime labor service. Before her death, she received a certificate

recognizing her service to the nation. At the time, students were taught that serving the emperor and sacrificing themselves for the country was honorable.

The language on the certificate reflects the values of wartime Japan. Looking at it today, I am reminded how completely young people were shaped by the atmosphere of war. Children were taught loyalty, sacrifice, and obedience. Many believed sincerely that giving their lives for the nation was their duty. When I look back on those years, I realize how deeply war influenced every aspect of society.

I also reflected on Japan's history before 1945. For many decades, Japan was involved in one conflict after another. War became a recurring part of national life. Since 1945, however, Japan has experienced a long period without war. For me, that is one of the most important lessons of history.

When I think about Hiroshima, I do not think only about destruction. I think about what came afterward. I think about rebuilding. I think about peace. I think about the responsibility to remember.

Near my childhood home there was a place where many victims who died after the atomic bombing were cremated. The dead were brought there from across the city. For people of my generation, such places were part of everyday memory. The bombing was not something distant. Its presence remained visible for years. Even now, those memories have not disappeared.

I believe opportunities like ours today are important. When people from different countries meet face to face, listen carefully, and try to understand one another, they create the possibility of a better future. Peace is not created only by governments. It is also created through human relationships. Through listening. Through empathy. Through remembrance. That is why I continue to tell my story.

I am now one of the remaining *hibakusha*. My generation is disappearing. Soon there will be no one left who can speak from direct experience. That is why I hope younger generations will continue to listen, to learn, and to share these stories. Only then can the lessons of Hiroshima survive.

Thank you for listening to my story.