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Hiroshima Survivor Interview (Translated and Edited)

May 18, 2026

Thank you for coming to Hiroshima and listening to my story.

Before I begin talking about the atomic bomb, I would like to tell you about my father.

This is a photograph of him. He died during the war at the age of twenty-nine near the Palau Islands in the Pacific. He died before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. At that time my mother was only twenty-four years old. I was one year and eight months old, and my younger brother was only two weeks old. My brother was still a newborn. His eyes had not yet opened completely, and my mother suddenly found herself alone with two very young children.

She later told me how devastated she was when she learned of my father's death. She cried constantly. She did not know how she would survive or how she would raise us. She once told me that she became so desperate she thought about taking my brother and me into the sea and ending all of our lives together. But when she looked at us sleeping peacefully, she could not do it. Instead, she decided she would live for her children. Many years later she told me that she cried so much that it seemed as though tears were coming from her ears.

I often show visitors a family photograph taken on New Year's Day in 1945, the year Hiroshima was bombed. My father had already died by that time. The photograph shows my mother, my younger brother, and me. You can also see my grandfather, my uncle and aunt, and a younger uncle. The four of them lived together at my grandfather's house only about five hundred meters from the hypocenter. My grandmother had passed away before I was born. My mother looks very young in that photograph.

Ours was a large extended family. We lived in different houses, but everyone helped one another. In those days, family support meant everything. My uncle and aunt had no children of their own and had planned to adopt me. So, I often stayed with them

On August 5, 1945, the day before the atomic bombing, my young uncle took me by bicycle from my grandparents' house back to our house in Eba, about three kilometers from the hypocenter. I was three years old. It was already becoming dark when we arrived. My mother was grateful that he had brought me home safely and gave him a small amount of money as a thank-you. My mother later told me that he was so happy to

receive that little gift that he rode away on his bicycle whistling. He returned to my grandparents' home near the center of Hiroshima. The next morning he died in the atomic bombing. He never had a chance to spend the money. For the rest of her life my mother remembered him riding away, whistling in the evening darkness.

In a very real sense, he saved my life. Had I remained at my grandparents' house, only five hundred meters from the hypocenter, I would certainly have died with the rest of the family. My mother suggested he should stay over since it was getting late, but he said he would go home as he hadn't told his sister-in-law that he would stay with us. So my mother gave him some pocket money to thank him. Even many years later, my mother regretted not asking him to stay overnight with us. If she had done so, he might have survived.

Three days after the bombing, my mother decided she had to search for our relatives. Traveling into the center of Hiroshima was almost impossible. Debris covered the roads and bridges. The city had become a wasteland. Eventually soldiers helped her move through the devastated areas. She took my younger brother with her, and I accompanied them. I was only three years old, but some of the things I saw that day never left me.

My mother's family home had stood only five hundred meters from the hypocenter. When we reached the area, there was almost nothing left. Nothing. The buildings had disappeared. My mother later told me that there were no recognizable structures, no belongings, no signs of ordinary life. Only ashes and scattered remains. In some places there were fragments of bone.

She was able to identify the remains of three people: her older brother and younger brother by their trouser belt buckles and her sister-in-law by a hair clip. For my grandfather, however, there was nothing. My mother searched and searched the area near the hypocenter but never found him. Even today we do not know exactly where he died.

I remember seeing a streetcar destroyed by the blast. I remember seeing pitch-black corpses standing in the streetcar holding onto straps with their hair standing on end. When I was in elementary school, I told classmates about what I had seen. They said it was impossible. They told me that I was too young and that I must have dreamed those scenes. But I knew they were real.

After the war there was censorship during the occupation period, and people were discouraged from speaking openly about the atomic bomb. Later, the censorship was lifted by the San Francisco Treaty (Treaty of Peace with Japan) in 1952. When survivors began sharing their experiences publicly, I heard adults describing scenes identical to those I remembered. Only then did I fully understand that my memories were real and not dreams.

I also remember seeing the fireball. At the moment of the explosion, we were approximately three kilometers from the hypocenter. although I was inside the house, I remember seeing an orange fireball fall. The room where we had just been sleeping was facing the hypocenter. Immediately after the explosion, we saw the walls collapse, parts of the ceiling fall, furniture crash to the floor and the windows shatter.

The room we were in was on the opposite side from the hypocenter, and, since there was nothing in the room, we weren't at risk of being crushed. None of us (my grandmother, mother, younger brother and myself) suffered even a scratch. A hole large enough for a person to crawl through opened in the wall of that room, and we all crawled out.

If we had been in another room, we might have been killed or seriously injured. Even now, when I think about those events, I realize how much survival depended upon chance. A different room, a different decision, one more night at my grandparents' house, one bicycle ride: Any of those things could have changed my life completely.

Next to our house was a field with fig trees. My mother later told me that we spent about a week there. We slept outdoors on the ground among the weeds beneath the trees. The shade from the fig trees offered some protection from the August sun. I believe it was the day of the bombing, even three kilometers from the hypocenter, the leaves of the fig tree caught fire. I remember my mother drawing water from our well, and vigorous men passing buckets from hand to hand in an effort to stop the flames from spreading.

As the hours passed, more and more people began arriving. The shade beneath the trees became a refuge for survivors making their way through the city. I was only three years old, and I cannot remember details about their injuries, but I clearly remember people coming into the field. Many were asking for water. "Water... water..." They spoke in weak voices. That is one of the memories that has stayed with me throughout my life.

Nearby was Eba Elementary School. An emergency first-aid station had been established there because hospitals had been destroyed or overwhelmed. Survivors kept arriving. My mother was not a nurse, but people in the neighborhood asked for volunteers, and she went to help. Before leaving, she asked my grandmother to look after my younger brother. Then she took me with her to the school.

I have often thought about how remarkable people were in those days. Everyone had suffered. Everyone had lost something. Yet people still helped one another. The school had almost no supplies. There was little medicine and almost no equipment. The wounded simply had to endure their pain. My mother later told me that one of the few things she could do was remove maggots from wounds. She used chopsticks because there were no medical instruments available. Even today it is difficult for me to imagine what she witnessed.

I was too young to sit quietly for long periods and the school was near the Honkawa River. I wandered away and spent time near the riverbank. What I saw there has never left me. Since there was no bridge, stones had been placed in the river to allow people to cross to Yoshijima on the opposite side. When I got to the riverbank, I saw bodies floating downstream. The current carried them until they became caught against the rocks. There were many of them.

At three years old, I did not fully understand what I was seeing. I do not remember feeling fear in the way an adult would. What I remember is recognizing that this was something completely outside ordinary life. I had never seen anything like it before. Workers used hooks to pull bodies from the river. The dead were laid out in open areas nearby. Wood was stacked between and around them and the pile was enclosed with sheet metal. Mass cremations were carried out, because there were simply too many victims.

I remember the scene, but not necessarily the emotions. Sometimes people ask whether I suffered flashbacks or recurring nightmares as I grew older. I did not. Many survivors who were older than I was remembered the smells, the sounds, and specific moments of terror. Because I was only three, my memories are different. They are more like images frozen in time.

As I became older, I reflected on what those images meant. I would think about what my mother had endured. I would think about the people I had seen. I would think about the city that had disappeared in a single morning. The memories themselves remained clear.

I also remember how people worked together. Neighbors shared food. Strangers helped one another. People who had lost family members spent their days caring for others. In the middle of unimaginable destruction, there was also kindness. That is something I never forgot.

Years later, when people questioned whether a three-year-old child could truly remember such things, I would think back to those scenes beside the river and beneath the fig trees. Those memories remain vivid because nothing before or after was ever quite the same.

The bombing destroyed a city. But it also revealed both the worst and the best of human beings. I saw suffering. I saw death. But I also saw compassion. And I think those lessons stayed with me throughout my life.

As I grew older, I continued to learn more about what had happened to my mother's family near the hypocenter. My mother's father lived only about five hundred meters from where the atomic bomb exploded. Their house was also a watch repair shop. Before the bombing, people from surrounding communities would bring watches there to be repaired. Almost everything was destroyed.

A watch that someone had left for repairs was found inside the air-raid shelter where it was kept until he died. After he died, his family donated it to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. When there was a special exhibition at the museum in 2014, the watch was displayed along with photographs of my family. I attended the exhibition and saw the watch for the first time.

My mother never stopped talking about what she had seen after the bombing. Three days after the explosion, she searched the area where her family home had stood. She cleared some rubble and dug a little into the soil. There she found a piece of tatami mat. I found that difficult to believe since the first floor had been a watch shop with no tatami mats. What puzzled me was that the piece she found appeared to have come from a second-floor room. As a child, and even as an adult, I found that difficult to believe. How could something from an upper floor end up buried beneath the ground? For many years I wondered whether my mother might somehow have misunderstood what she saw.

Then, in recent years, excavations were conducted in parts of what is now Peace Memorial Park. Before the bombing, families had lived there. Streets, shops, and homes once occupied the ground where visitors now walk peacefully through the park. During one excavation, workers uncovered roof tiles and structural remains from houses that had stood near the hypocenter.

On December 25 of last year (2025), I attended a lecture held on the basement floor of the Peace Memorial Museum on the “people’s lives beneath the Peace Park”. I was surprised to learn that when the area south of the museum was excavated, roof tiles from the second story of the Morimoto residence were discovered. Apparently, they were buried there due to the pressure of the blast of the atomic bomb. When I later spoke with museum staff, they explained that it is impossible to investigate further because they cannot dig the area where buildings are currently standing. Even now, beneath today's peaceful city, the physical remnants of August 6, 1945 still exist. The past is never entirely gone.

One of the objects that has affected me most throughout my life is my father's military medal. I brought it with me today. This medal was awarded to my father for his service during Japan's war in China before the Pacific War. It bears the imperial chrysanthemum crest. My mother kept this medal. After she passed away, my younger brother kept it in his possession. After he died, it came to me. At that time I recalled what my mother told me. My father told my mother that he had killed nine people during the war. He said that because of what he had done, he did not expect to die peacefully at home on a tatami mat. He believed he would die in war. And he did.

When I hold this medal now, I think not only about my father but also about the nine people he killed. Those nine people had families. They had mothers and fathers. Perhaps they had wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, or children.

When my mother learned of my father's death, she cried endlessly. She became so overwhelmed by grief that she considered ending her own life. And sometimes I think about the families of those nine people. Perhaps they cried the same way. Perhaps they experienced the same grief. Perhaps they also wondered how they could continue living. If I knew who those families were, I would want to meet them. I would want to apologize.

That feeling became even stronger after hearing your story about traveling to the Marshall Islands and meeting survivors affected by nuclear testing. When you described apologizing for your father's participation in Operation Crossroads, I felt a connection. The situations are different, but the feeling is similar. We inherit history from our parents. We cannot change what happened. But we can choose how we respond to it.

As I have grown older, I have become increasingly interested in questions of responsibility, memory and history. That is one reason I devoted many years to studying literature on the theme of atomic bombing. Among all the writers and poets who wrote about the atomic bomb, one person became especially important to me: Sadako Kurihara. Many survivors wrote about suffering. Many wrote about loss. Many wrote about the horrors of the bombing. She said "Atomic survivors are also victimizers."

One of her most famous works tells the story of a baby born shortly after the atomic bombing. The setting was a basement of the Postal Savings Office near the Red Cross Hospital. The building had collapsed. People were trapped and injured. Death surrounded them. Yet in the midst of all that destruction, a woman went into labor. People searched desperately for anything that might help with the birth. Someone found a washbasin. Someone else found scissors. Injured survivors worked together to help bring a child into the world.

In Kurihara's poem, the midwife who assists with the birth later dies from her injuries, although in her actual life, she survived. The poem became one of the most famous works of Sadako Kurihara because it captures both death and hope at the same moment. A new life was born while thousands of others were being lost. Years later I met the child who had been born that day. The mother has passed away now. The midwife eventually passed away as well. But the baby survived and grew into adulthood.

To me, that story symbolizes Hiroshima itself. Even in the darkest circumstances imaginable, life continued. Hope continued. Human beings continued to help one another. And that is why the story has remained so powerful for generations.

My academic work eventually focused on Sadako Kurihara because she was different from other Hiroshima writers. Many survivors wrote about what had happened to them. They wrote about suffering, loss, radiation sickness, and grief. Those stories are important. But Kurihara asked a question that very few people were willing to ask.

She said we were not only victims. We were also victimizers. When I first encountered that idea, it stayed with me. Many people find it difficult to understand. After all, Hiroshima suffered one of the greatest tragedies in human history. More than one hundred thousand people died. Entire families disappeared. The city was destroyed. How could survivors also be victimizers?

To understand what Kurihara meant, we have to remember what Hiroshima was before the atomic bomb. Hiroshima was a military city. There were military facilities throughout the city. Soldiers passed through Hiroshima Port to battlefields across Asia and the Pacific. The military presence helped support the local economy. Many people depended upon it for their livelihoods.

My father was one of those soldiers. When I look at his medal, I am reminded of that reality. As a child, I thought only about the loss of my father. As an adult, I began thinking about the people he killed and about the suffering experienced by families in other countries. That is why Kurihara's idea spoke to me so strongly.

We were victims. But we were also connected to a nation that brought suffering to others. Both things can be true at the same time. Recognizing that does not diminish the tragedy of Hiroshima. Instead, it allows us to understand history more honestly. Many people ask whether I hate Americans because the United States dropped the atomic bomb. My answer is no. I hate war. That is different.

After the war, Japan faced terrible hardships. There were shortages of food, medicine, clothing, and almost everything else. I remember attending elementary school and receiving bread and milk provided through assistance programs. I remember seeing help arrive from the United States. Without that assistance, many people would have suffered even more than they already had. Because of those experiences, I do not think in terms of hating nations or entire groups of people.

The atomic bomb was used during a war. That does not mean I believe it was justified. But hatred itself solves nothing. What I oppose is war. Because of war, ordinary people are placed into situations where they are asked to do things they would never otherwise do. War turns human beings into devils. War causes suffering that continues long after the fighting ends.

When I see conflicts around the world today, I think especially about civilians. Soldiers understand that they may be placed in danger. But children do not choose war. Babies do not choose war. Families do not choose war. I cannot accept the killing of innocent civilians. That is why I continue to speak about Hiroshima.

People often ask me what peace means. Everyone has a different answer. For me, peace means a society where people can say what they truly think. Peace requires freedom of speech. If people are afraid to speak honestly, if they are afraid to question leaders, if they are afraid to express their beliefs, then peace is already in danger. That conviction comes partly from what happened before and during the war.

Too many people simply followed orders. Too many people stopped asking questions. Too many people accepted what they were told. When I speak to students who visit Hiroshima, I always tell them the same thing: Do not be indifferent to politics. Do not be ignorant about politics. Many young people think politics has nothing to do with them. But history shows us that indifference can have terrible consequences. Every citizen has a responsibility.

My father killed nine people because he lived in a society where questioning authority was difficult and where obedience was expected. I do not say this to condemn him. I loved my father. I never had the chance to know him, but I have spent my entire life thinking about him. I believe he was an ordinary person living in extraordinary times. But his story reminds me that ordinary people must think for themselves. They must ask questions. They must not simply follow. That is one of the most important lessons I have learned from Hiroshima.

When I heard your story about your father and Operation Crossroads, I felt a connection between our experiences. Both of us have spent years reflecting on actions taken by our fathers. Both of us have tried to understand rather than simply judge. Both of us have searched for ways to respond with honesty and humanity. I think that is important. History is not changed by denying it. History is changed by learning from it.

The survivors of Hiroshima are becoming fewer every year. Soon there will be no one left who personally remembers what happened on August 6, 1945. That is why I continue to tell my story. I want younger generations to understand what war does to human beings. I want them to understand the value of freedom. I want them to understand the importance of democracy.

And above all, I want them to understand that peace is not something that exists automatically. Peace survives only when people care enough to protect it. Please do not be indifferent. Please do not be silent. Please think for yourselves. And please do

everything you can to ensure that no one, anywhere in the world, ever experiences what happened in Hiroshima again.

Thank you for coming to Hiroshima and for listening to my story.