

Story of Hiroshima

Life of an Atomic Bomb Survivor

By Masaya Nemoto



Genbaku (Atomic Bomb) Dome in Hiroshima, a building destroyed by the A-bomb. Photograph by the author.

On August 6, 1945, there was a clear blue sky over Hiroshima. Hirano and his classmates were supposed to be engaged in demolition activity in the center of the city around 9:00 a.m.



Young Hirano at age twelve with his elementary school classmates shortly before entering junior high. Hirano is circled in the second row from the front, the fourth from the left. Photo courtesy of Hirano.

On August 6, 1945, the US dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. The nuclear bomb exploded over the center of the city, completely devastating it. The area within 1.2 miles of the hypocenter was entirely leveled and burned. According to the city of Hiroshima, approximately 140,000 people had died by the end of December 1945.¹ The energy of the A-bomb consisted of heat rays, blast, and radiation.² Severe heat rays from the A-bomb reached people residing up to two miles away from the hypocenter. Citizens within 0.7 miles suffered fatal injuries to their internal organs, and many were to die in the next few days. The force of the blast threw some people for several yards and caused buildings to collapse crushing their occupants. The radiation emitted from the A-bomb was very harmful to the human body.³ Its short-term repercussions were called acute disorders, illnesses that affected the victims a few hours to several months after exposure to excessive radiation. Typical symptoms included vomiting, diarrhea, hair loss, and reduced blood cell counts, which often killed the sufferers. In the long term, the radiation caused serious diseases in survivors, such as leukemia and other cancers.

This article examines the life of an A-bomb survivor, Sadao Hirano. Hirano is not a well-known figure; he is an ordinary A-bomb survivor.⁴ However, his personal story has a twofold significance. Firstly, it eloquently recounts how survivors have suffered from the effects of the A-bomb. These effects are permanent, and the victims suffer both physically and psychologically. Secondly, his life story demonstrates the resiliency of the human spirit. Instead of being crushed by the dreadful violence to which they were subjected, A-bomb survivors have struggled, resisted, and coped with it. They are even able to turn their experience of suffering into a positive force as they call for peace through telling their stories.

The following personal story is based on in-depth interviews that I conducted during my fieldwork in Hiroshima. I met Hirano for the first time in March 2008. I interviewed him intensively in 2008 and conducted follow-up interviews in 2009, 2011, 2013, and 2015. Most of the interviews took place at his home in a casual atmosphere. Over the course of seven years of these interviews, I noticed that his attitude had changed dramatically, especially after he became a storyteller relating his A-bomb experience in Hiroshima.

Beginning of Suffering: Atomic Bomb Experience

Born in 1932 as the second son in a Hiroshima family and raised in a suburb of the city, Hirano described his childhood as “the best time” of his life. He often played at a beach in his neighborhood, where he caught fish, crabs, and shells. He liked those “little adventures.” After Japan started a war with the US by attacking Pearl Harbor in 1941, his “adventures” became an important source of food for his family.

In 1945, at the age of twelve, Hirano enrolled in a junior high school in Hiroshima City four months before the US dropped the A-bomb. He did not have many chances to study in school. Facing a labor shortage due to the deteriorating state of the war, the Japanese government mobilized junior high school students to work. Hirano and his classmates worked on farms or helped demolish houses to create firebreaks in preparation for the US air raids.

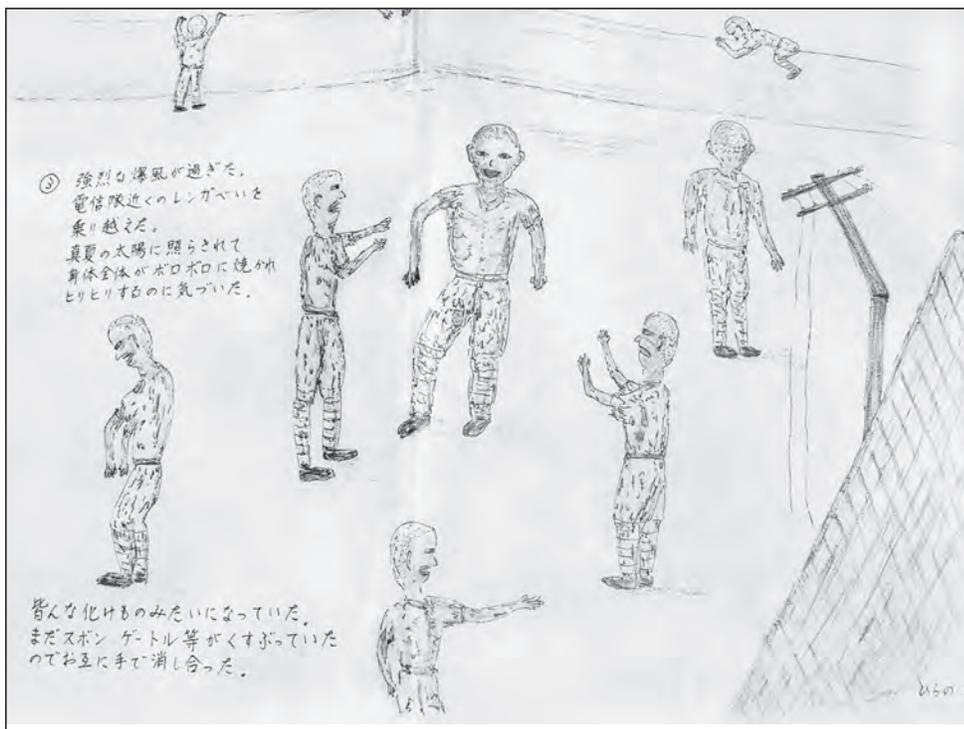
On August 6, 1945, there was a clear blue sky over Hiroshima. Hirano and his classmates were supposed to be engaged in demolition activity in the center of the city around 9:00 a.m. If they had gone to work an hour earlier, they might have died. When the Enola Gay dropped the A-bomb, they were attending a morning assembly in their schoolyard, located 1.2 miles away from the hypocenter. Hirano described the moment as follows:

8:15 a.m. was our meeting time. Suddenly, a strong orangey flash, much lighter than summer sunshine,

When Hirano looked at himself and his classmates, they had all been badly burned and their clothes were shredded; they looked like “monsters.”

hit with a burst. We were not able to avoid it because we had no shade in the schoolyard. So we were directly burned. Well, I didn't feel “burned” at that moment because I didn't feel anything. Then, the blast came. It blew us over. Everything became muddled and chaotic. Darkness surrounded us for a moment. I was thirsty and it was hard to breathe because there was too much dust. My classmates screamed, “It hurts!” or “Mother!” One of them was looking for his hat and shouted, “My hat is missing!” Anyway, everyone ran around in confusion.

When Hirano looked at himself and his classmates, they had all been badly burned and their clothes were shredded; they looked like “monsters.” Believing that the US would soon attack again, Hirano and two of his classmates escaped to a nearby hill. When they found a bomb shelter, which was just a small cave, it was already full of sufferers groaning in pain. Engraved in Hirano's memory was a man whose belly had been pierced by a wooden pole. Some soldiers tried to pull it out of him, but they could not remove it. Hirano and his friends started homeward after staying outside the shelter for quite some time. They could not help but walk slowly with their heads down and their hands held forward just like “ghosts.”⁵



His classmates looked like “monsters” right after the explosion of the A-bomb. Drawing by Hirano.

On the way, they found three buckets of water and gulped them down: “We were brought back to life.” As they continued walking home, they met a group of people who had come from the suburbs to help. Hirano got a ride from the rescue party, finally arriving home at around 6:00 p.m. His mother noticed that he was clasping something in his right hand. Wondering what it was, she opened his fingers one by one and found that Hirano was holding the burned skin that had peeled off his right arm. His mother cut off the skin with scissors, cleaned his body with sake, and made him drink a little of it as well. Immediately intoxicated, Hirano lost consciousness.

Hirano was prostrated for about twenty days. He suffered from burns on his face, neck, back, arms, and thighs. The most severely burned was his right arm. Hirano kept moaning in pain while lying on the Japanese-style bedding. His injuries quickly began to drip with pus that gave off a vile smell. His mother took primary care of him while his brothers and sisters helped. Hirano's mother did everything she could to help him recover. In the beginning, she used medicine such as iodine, but this quickly ran out. She then used cooking oil and the juice of vegetables such as cucumbers to coat his burn wounds.⁶ She even applied the ashes of human bone to his injuries, although this caused him extreme pain. By the time Hirano was able to walk again, thanks to his mother's devoted care, Japan had surrendered and the war was over.

Suffering after the War

Hirano's burns have caused him tremendous physical disability and pain. They never completely healed. Instead, the burn on his right arm formed a keloid scar where the skin was elevated and hardened and had taken on a reddish color for years. Even today, Hirano cannot fully extend his right arm due to the deformed skin. The keloid scar causes him pain. He discussed the pain as follows:

No one could understand the pain unless one experiences it. The

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Keloid scar on Hirano's right arm. This picture was taken in the 1970s. Photo courtesy of Hirano.

A-bomb survivors were avoided because of their unusual appearance and/or experience of radiation exposure, which people thought was contagious.

burn wound is still deformed. Whenever I move my right arm, I feel pain. I cannot explain it in words. Well, I would like you to have my body if it were possible. If you did, your face would be distorted because of the pain. I have endured such pain for more than sixty years.

As he remarked, the pain is interminable. It is unspeakable and therefore incomprehensible to others. Thus, Hirano has been able to do nothing but grin and bear it.

The keloid scar changed Hirano's physical appearance from "normal" to "bad-looking" or even "dirty," as he said frankly in the interview. He usually hides his scars from public view; however, he had to expose them sometimes, especially when he was working. In 1951, after graduating from high school, he got a job in a local bank in Hiroshima. He often noticed that customers in the bank stared at his right arm as if his scar appeared "weird" or even "uncanny" to them. He began to introduce himself as an A-bomb survivor to make them understand why he had such an "ugly" arm. He said, "I had to tell customers that I was an A-bomb survivor, though I didn't like to do it. Otherwise, they wouldn't stop staring at my scar, which I just couldn't bear." Hirano accepted the change in his appearance to some extent. However, he still yearned for a life without the scar and occasionally thought about what his life would be like without it. He said:

I've already accepted the ugly scars in some way. I know it was my fate. However, at times I imagine what my unscathed body was like. I remember that my right arm had beautiful skin. But this is just in retrospect. In reality, my body is ugly because of wounds and scars.

The change in his physical appearance influenced Hirano psychologically, often destabilizing his state of mind.

Hirano has experienced discrimination from other Japanese. One day when he was young, he went to a hot spring for treatment. As soon as Hirano started bathing, everyone stood up and went away. Hirano was shocked that others avoided him as if he were a "monster" or had a "contagious" disease. He said, "They must have felt that I was making the hot spring dirty." Just as in Hirano's case, A-bomb survivors have suffered discrimination from Japanese people. A-bomb survivors were avoided because of their unusual appearance and/or experience of radiation

exposure, which people thought was contagious. Some had difficulty finding jobs because of preconceived notions that they would easily get sick due to the effects of radiation. Others had trouble getting married because radiation was often thought to have genetic effects. Although these forms of discrimination largely prevailed in the past, they may still persist to this day.

The radiation emitted by the A-bomb has also troubled Hirano for a long time. Hirano suffered from poor health especially when he was young. He describes that his health was like "worn-out cotton"; he was easily exhausted, felt severe fatigue, and lost focus and strength. In that condition, he could hardly move and just wanted to lie down. He even used his hands to walk up the stairs just like "a four-legged animal." Although he never consulted a doctor, he assumes that his poor health stemmed from radiation because the symptoms were quite common among A-bomb survivors. He was unable to compete with his colleagues and barely managed to keep up with them. He never shared his problem with anyone in his office because he feared being fired if he told someone the truth. He continued



Hirano in his twenties hiding his right arm from being photographed. Photos courtesy of Hirano.



Through telling his personal story, he became an emissary of peace who taught the importance of harmony and the abhorrence of war and nuclear weapons.



Hirano telling his story to elementary school students. Photographed by the author.

to work at the same bank without complaint until he reached the age of retirement. For him, there was no choice but to work to support his family.

Supporting my family was my biggest concern. So I had to be patient.

The pain from the scars and fatigue from radiation have been a part of my body, my life. I cannot get rid of them anyway. I'm resigned to my fate.

The radiation drastically changed his body in ways beyond his scar. However, he has to tolerate all of this to support his family. Hirano has also been anxious about the genetic effects of radiation.⁷ He married in his twenties and now has children and grandchildren. Although the genetic effects of A-bomb radiation have never been proven by scientists, he has wondered if there is any possibility of something happening to his descendants: "We, ordinary people, cannot know how radiation works and destroys the human body because we cannot see it directly."

The main elements of Hirano's suffering explained above, including pain, a "hideous" appearance, discrimination, poor health, and anxiety, led to an inferiority complex. According to him, he became pessimistic after his A-bomb experience. He never smiled wholeheartedly and was in a dismal mood. Hirano also is still hesitant to mingle with people and rarely goes out with his friends. He stated clearly, "My life was completely changed by the A-bomb."

Transformation: Telling Stories as His Mission

In his twilight years, Hirano experienced another noticeable change; he became a storyteller as a witness of the A-bomb experience and has called for peace.⁸

Hirano was formerly averse to recounting his experience to others. One early spring afternoon in 2008, I met Hirano for the first time at his house in Hiroshima. I was introduced to him by another male A-bomb survivor. At the end of my interview, the survivor asked Hirano to join

in a storytelling activity where A-bomb survivors talked about their experiences to share them with others. However, Hirano refused politely but firmly. He told us that he was not comfortable speaking in public and wanted to spend the rest of his life without any trouble. He also pointed out how difficult it was for him to share the experience of an A-bomb survivor:

I think it is almost impossible to represent my experience. What I could tell is just the tip of the iceberg. I cannot explain the rest through words. If you have not had the same experience, you could never know what exactly happened and how much the person suffered.

On the other hand, Hirano felt that he might have a "duty" to speak as an A-bomb survivor. I visited him again a week after my first interview. He told me that he should share his experience with

people living in this world. For him, the experience of A-bomb survivors was so significant for human survival that it should be passed on to future generations. In fact, even before I met him, he had already written some accounts of his experiences and made drawings of what he had gone through. However, he was still torn between enjoying the rest of his life without complications and taking on a new challenge as his "duty."

Despite his initial refusal, Hirano finally became a storyteller in the summer of 2009. I asked Hirano why he got involved in storytelling. He stressed his "duty" as an A-bomb survivor, in addition to the fact that he could no longer ignore an increasing number of requests.

Of course, even now, I don't want to speak about my suffering in public. I wouldn't do it if I didn't have to. But I think I have a duty to recount my experience, not only a duty to the victims who lost their lives because of the A-bomb, but also to people living in the present world. I could do something for people no matter how tiny that thing is.

Because of this so-called "duty" he feels, Hirano finally joined the storytelling. He shared his experiences and feelings with his audience, showing the "ugly" scar on his right arm. He explained how miserable people's lives were during the war, how he suffered in the atomic bombing, and how important peace was. Through telling his personal story, he became an emissary of peace who taught the importance of harmony and the abhorrence of war and nuclear weapons.

As a result of his storytelling, Hirano has changed his attitude. In February 2015, I visited Hirano once again. He welcomed me with a friendly smile. He informed me rather proudly that he had told his story more than a hundred times since he started. Then, he said, "I'm happy and glad to be alive." It was the first time I had ever heard him say such a thing. It was an indication that Hirano had somehow come to accept his life in a more positive way. He also expressed his hope to pursue his storytelling as long as he could. He is now determined to recount his experience to others. For him,

it is his obligation as someone who was fortunate to survive the A-bomb, although he suffered greatly. Hirano found his mission and passion as an emissary of peace just before the seventieth anniversary of the A-bombing on Hiroshima.

Conclusion

Even one life story can provide a vivid account of how A-bomb survivors have lived their lives since August 6, 1945. Hirano's life story illustrates not only the suffering of A-bomb survivors but also their resilience. On one hand, A-bomb survivors have suffered from diverse effects caused directly and indirectly by the A-bomb. In Hirano's case, he has struggled with pain from his keloid scar, an ill-favored appearance, discrimination, poor health, anxiety for his descendants, and an inferiority complex. As Hirano put it simply, the A-bomb changed people's lives completely even if they were able to survive. On the other hand, the lives of A-bomb survivors often teach us about the resiliency of the human spirit. As Hirano's transformation suggests, some survivors turn the experience of their suffering into a positive force. Hirano found his mission in telling of his experience and calling for peace, by which he achieved a positive sense of self. The A-bombing is one of the most significant events in the national history of Japan, as well as that of the United States. However, humanity can learn a valuable lesson from this catastrophe, especially through the personal stories of A-bomb survivors.

Suggested Resources

Teachers and students can learn more about the sufferings of A-bomb survivors from various perspectives by reading other A-bomb survivors' personal stories. For example, Hideko Snider's autobiography, *One Sunny Day: A Child's Memories of Hiroshima* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1996), shows a sense of guilt as a survivor. A brief article on Shōso Kawamoto gives an example of marriage discrimination against A-bomb survivors, which is available on the website of *Hiroshima Peace Media Center*, "Survivors' Stories," accessed May 17, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/q78axsz>. A testimonial video of Kan Munhi illustrates how a Korean experienced the A-bomb and lived his life after the war, which is available on the website of the *National Peace Memorial Halls for the Atomic Bomb Victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, "Global Network," accessed May 17, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/osse2u3>. The websites provide memoirs and videos of A-bomb survivors in English. ■

NOTES

1. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, *The Spirit of Hiroshima: An Introduction to the Atomic Bomb Tragedy*, 11th ed. (Hiroshima: Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, 2014), 41. The number of deaths varies according to the body providing the estimate and how they calculate it. The city of Hiroshima estimates 140,000, a number that includes deaths until the end of December 1945, because radiation from the A-bomb often killed people after August 6.
2. For the effects of the A-bomb on people, see Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, "Damage by the Heat Rays," "Damage by the Blast," "Damage by the Radiation," accessed March 10, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/ptdlfxq>.
3. According to the Radiation Effects Research Foundation (RERF), "Radiation is harmful to health because radiation exposure can damage cellular DNA" and "DNA damage from radiation exposure causes various kinds of disease," "How Radiation Harms Cells," RERF, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/otnv2pr>.
4. According to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, Japan, in 2012, there were around 200,000 A-bomb survivors from both Hiroshima and Nagasaki living in Japan. Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, Japan, "*Hibakusha (hibakusha kenkou techou syojisya) no suii* [change of the number of A-bomb survivors (who hold the certificate)]," accessed March 16, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/oj93jnx>. Unfortunately, the web page is only in Japanese.
5. Other survivors I interviewed also witnessed sufferers who walked in the same manner as Hirano did. They extended their arms forward, as this seemed to help minimize the pain caused by their burns.
6. During the war, ordinary people in Japan faced serious medicine shortages. They

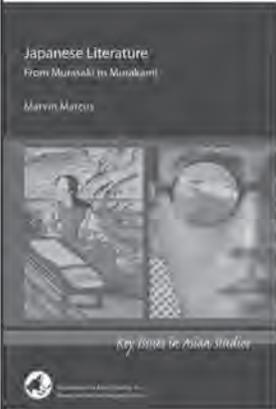
As Hirano put it simply, the A-bomb changed people's lives completely even if they were able to survive.

often used home remedies because they did not have enough medicine. Using vegetable juice was one such home remedy for burn wounds.

7. While radiation is well-known to have an influence on genes, the genetic effects of A-bomb radiation have not been scientifically proven. However, anxiety about the genetic effects, especially fears of deformity, have haunted survivors to this day. For a scientific point of view, see, "Frequently Asked Questions: What Health Effects Have Been Seen Among the Children Born to Atomic-Bomb Survivors?," RERF, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/q9hxj6k>.
8. Storytelling for educational purposes began in the early 1980s and has been popular in Hiroshima. In 2008, it was said that there were around 200 A-bomb survivors who engaged in the activity, although this number was a rough estimate. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is one of the organizations that arranges storytelling activities for visitors.

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