

## WHAT'S IT LIKE TO SURVIVE AN ATOMIC BOMB

When I found my sister, only her bones were left.

I had been told that she died in the bombing, so I went to identify her. But when I got to the bomb shelter where she had been hiding with a friend, I only saw two charred bodies. They were unrecognizable. Then I noticed that one had a gold tooth. I knew my sister didn't have a crown on any of her teeth, so that's how I knew which one was her. I gathered her bones and left her friend there for her own family to claim. My sister was 23. She had been a teacher.

Most people think they would like their loved one to live even an hour longer, but with this kind of bomb, I knew it was better to die right away. I was grateful that she had died immediately. That was the best I could hope for.

A B-29 bomber transported the atomic bomb they called "Little Boy" on the morning of 6 August 1945. My mother, my father, and my sister were in Hiroshima when the bomb hit. I was 18 and a freshman at Hiroshima University, but to support the war effort I had been sent 70 kilometres away to Mihara to supervise a team of high school-age factory workers. We supplied fuel to fighter planes.

I was at work that morning when I found out that a huge bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. They said that fire was spreading through the city and that catastrophe was unavoidable. At the time, we didn't know it was an atomic bomb. I got three days off from my superior and rushed to the train station to get back to my family, but nobody knew when the trains would resume running. I waited at the station in Mihara the entire day and finally arrived in Hiroshima about 8 o'clock in the evening. That delayed train saved me from being exposed to the most extreme concentration of radiation.

As I walked to my parents' house from the station that night, I saw many dead horses, but no human corpses. Seventy-two years later, I learned from a TV program that the streets I had walked down that night were in an area where the first cleanup efforts had taken place. I had been spared from an even more terrifying sight.

Our house was destroyed, so I walked to the nearby university campus, where people were sleeping in tents. I found my parents there. My mother was bleeding from her head, but able to talk and otherwise OK. My father had been at his office, which was a very sturdy concrete building, so he didn't have many injuries. I stayed in a tent with them that night. The next day, I went to claim my sister's body.

My sister was a teacher at a girls high school. She was married, but her husband was away serving in the army, so she and her mother-in-law had rented a small house outside the city. Because so many air raids took place at night, it was common for people to rent homes outside the city for safety and commute into Hiroshima for work. But the day before the atomic bomb was dropped, my sister had a meeting, so she and her mother-in-law stayed at their house in the city that night. There was a bomb shelter under the first floor. When the

air raid sirens went off, the two of them, along with one of my sister's colleagues, went down there. But there wasn't enough room. As the air raid sirens blared, my sister's mother-in-law ran 10 kilometers back to their rural house.

After I found my sister, I spent my third day of leave looking for her mother-in-law. I'll never forget what I saw when I arrived at the house. She was lying face-up, and between her lips, there was a blood clot the size of a golf ball. She was badly burned and had blood all over her face and chest. The radiation must have affected her, yet she still made it back to the house. I could tell she had suffered terribly. I still can't bear to think about how badly she suffered before she died.

Later, I heard more stories of suffering. I heard about a group of schoolgirls who were so badly burned that their own mothers couldn't identify them. But they could still talk, so one by one the children called out. "Mom, I am Keiko."

I'm 90 now, but what I experienced that day is still very clear in my mind. I believe there should not be a bomb like this. Human beings should not have nuclear weapons. That's why I have dedicated the rest of my life to peace.

After the bomb, they told us that nothing would grow in Hiroshima for 75 years. Everything was destroyed. But soon after, some trees started to bud. It gave us hope that we could live on as well. Hope for a better, more peaceful world.

I recently moved from Hiroshima to Tokyo to have a new start and dedicate my last years to Rotary and peacebuilding. I have worked on a global grant to help fund the planting of saplings from trees that survived the atomic bomb. My goal is to plant these "peace trees" around the world. During the 2017 Rotary Convention in Atlanta, I helped plant one, a ginkgo tree, at the Carter Center.

I know nuclear weapons are not going away. But maybe I can help spread a message of peace so that others never suffer as we did.