

The Bomb on My Back Webinar: Commemorating & Learning From Courageous Hibakusha

Joseph Gerson

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I want to thank Jacqui Burke and Greater Manchester CND for inviting me to join my friend and long-term collaborator Rieko Asato in today's webinar. I've long had the pleasure of working with Jacqui, Rae Street and others from Greater Manchester CND.

The title of today's webinar is taken from the memoir of one of the most tortured and courageous A-bomb survivors, Sumiteru Taniguchi.¹ In truth, we are all carrying nuclear weapons on our backs, in our minds, and in the future we fear and hope will never come to pass. We cannot ignore the reality that all of the nuclear powers are upgrading their arsenals, that U.S., Russian, Chinese, Indian and Pakistani military confrontations on the rise, and we are just an incident or an accident away from escalation to the thinkable.

I've been asked to speak about Yamiguchi-san and Taniguchi -san, Hibakusha (witness survivors of the Nagasaki A-bomb), who I had the privilege of knowing in the last decades of their lives. Let me begin with an observation by Norma Field, an Okinawan-American scholar. In her book *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor*, she described the "especially precious" role of abused but courageous minorities who "do battle for themselves and for majorities." Oppression and abuse are anything but liberating, yet movements for democracy, peace, justice and human survival are in most cases initiated or led by those "precious people" whose wounds and life experiences make them sensitive to the suffering of others and to the dangers faced by the wider community.² This certainly applies to Yamaguchi-san and Taniguchi-san.

Friends, the savaging of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear weapons was an ultimate expression of full spectrum dominance. The bombs' fireballs were about three million degrees centigrade. Thousands of children, women and men near the epicenters of the explosions were vaporized. You see elements of their remains, along with schools, shops, a hospital and the largest cathedral in Asia in the photos of the mushroom clouds. In Hiroshima, in the first second after the bomb's detonation, everyone within a two-mile radius was irradiated. This was followed by the blast wave that destroyed nearly every structure within a two-mile radius. (These were one mile in the case of Nagasaki due to its hilly terrain and the plutonium bomb missing its target.) The blast wave was followed by the heat wave that burned people and rubble indiscriminately.

By year's end, 200,000 people had died. Cancers and radiation diseases have since killed many more. And, in the early years genetic damage from the A-bombs led to

¹ Taniguchi Sumiteru. *The Atomic Bomb On My Back*, Montpelier, Vt: Rootstock Publishing Co., 2020

² Norma Field. *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: Japan at Century's End*, New York: Vintage, 1993

babies' deaths and mutations – including births of so called jelly fish babies born with translucent skin and no bones in their bodies.

Admiral Leahy, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, later testified that “The use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance to the war.” In fact, the determinative reason for the A-bombings was to bring the war to an immediate end so the U.S. could avoid having to share influence with the Soviets in Northern China, Manchuria and Korea. It was to escape the moral judgements of the U.S. people and history that President Truman lied about the reason for the nuclear attacks, claiming that they were necessary to prevent casualties among U.S. troops being prepared for the invasion of Japan.

In fact, for months Japanese diplomats had been suing for peace on terms Truman accepted AFTER the A-bombings. With the U.S. committed to “unconditional surrender”, the one sticking point was the Japanese demand that Emperor Hirohito be allowed to remain on his throne. All senior U.S. military leaders opposed the atomic bombings. Secretary of War Stimson advised Truman that Japan’s surrender could be arranged “on terms acceptable” to the U.S. and that he “did not want to have the United States get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities.” The other generals and admirals joined him in his opposition.

John Dower, the dean of U.S Japan studies, summarized what the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki experienced: a “fiery inferno peopled with monsters and naked tormented bodies.....a raging inferno, streets full of monstrously deformed creatures; excruciating pain, without medicine and without surcease... Outlines of bodies were permanently etched as white shadows in black nimbus on streets or walls, but the bodies themselves had disappeared....there were innumerable corpses without apparent injury. Parts of bodies held their ground, like two legs severed below the knees, still standing. Many of the dead were turned into statues, some solid and others waiting to crumble at a touch.”

Senji Yamaguchi, then a student, had been assigned to digging trenches in Nagasaki’s Urakami district about half a mile from the epicenter in the hot sun. He was shocked by the flash of light that turned everything blinding white before he lost consciousness. On waking, he was unaware the he had been horribly burned. Houses were toppled and burning. He heard people trapped in their homes crying for help, but like everyone else, he focused on surviving by escaping. He joined the movement of people toward the Urakami river, “stepping over many corpses strewn on the ground” The river was completely covered with corpses. In the incredible heat, people had jumped in seeking refuge. The corpses were everywhere he looked. Others were reduced to carbon. It was, Senji testified, “literally hell on earth.”³ Only after crossing the river did he discover that his burnt skin was peeling off and dangling. His burnt body and chest were blackened. He couldn’t see his seared face.

³ Senji Yamaguchi. *Burnt Yet Undaunted: Verbatim Account of Senji Yamaguchi*, Tokyo: Japan Confederation of Atomic and Hydrogen Bomb Sufferers’ Organizations, 2002

Senji made it to a relief train, bleeding badly and again losing consciousness. He woke days later in the Omura naval hospital where months later he first saw Taniguchi-san.

Difficult as it is to believe, Taniguchi-san had it much worse. He was a 16-year-old postman, delivering unwanted draft notices and secret messages to war production factories in the Urakami district. He was about a mile from the epicenter when the blast wave blew him off his bicycle. He hugged ground as it trembled like an earthquake. Two small children with whom he'd often exchanged greetings flew past him "like pieces of dirt" A rock crashed onto him, and he kept telling himself "I will not die here. I will not die here"

When he eventually raised himself, his shirt was gone. He realized that his left arm was badly burned, and peeling skin hung from his fingers almost to the ground. The two children were dead, one burnt black, the other lying dead but seemingly unscathed. He didn't know that his back had been completely burned. Having collapsed and unable to move, a factory worker carried him to a farm, where people around him groaned and cried for water. After lying there for three days, with nearly no water or food, he was found and carried to an elementary school where the wounded died, "carried out one after the another." Taniguchi-san was eventually taken to the Omura Naval hospital. For the next 3 years and 8 months he was hospitalized, lying on his stomach and barely moving for most of that time. Black goo dripped from his bed sores which left an open wound that never completely healed. His bloody, almost skinless back was constantly exposed. He endured agonizing treatments that frequently led him to plead to be allowed to die.

It was at the Omura hospital that Yamaguchi-san saw this pathetic patient, and here in 1946 that the U.S. army took the photo of the boy with the bloody crimson back and near death.

During their extended hospital treatments, the two Hibakusha became friends. Over time, each would have more than 20 surgeries, and like many other Hibakusha each attempted suicide. As Yamiguchi-san later wrote that "for Hibakusha, the mental and physical wounds remain. They will never disappear.... Many Hibakusha have been on the end of life like walking on a thin rope. For them, living is a painful as dying."

For Taniguchi the constant pain, anxiety due to his scars and the ways that people looked at and discriminated against him, having been humiliated by the U.S. Atom Bomb Casualty Commission which treated Hibakusha like guinea pigs in part to gain data for the design of new nuclear weapons, and his heart break after repeatedly being rejected for marriage, led him to return to his birthplace to end his life. Looking out at the sea, he saw the faces of his postal colleagues and other A-bomb victims and "decided to outlive the tens of thousands of people whose lives were cut short" by the A-bomb. This, he wrote, "was the starting point of my commitment and dedication to the Hibakusha movement for the rest of my life."

Yamaguchi -san wrote that, “For Hibakusha, the campaign against A- and H-Bombs has been one of the reasons for not throwing away their lives.” They came, in the words of the journalist Wilfred Burchett, to represent the “indestructability of human resistance, ... the most stalwart and militant of peaceniks.” They created the Hibakusha movement that has inspired people around the world— not the least, the diplomats who negotiated the Treaty for the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons.

It wasn't easy. A decade after the A-bombings, these women and men began coming out from their isolation, poverty and hiding their terribly scarred faces and bodies. A few joined the first World Conference against A- & H- Bombs in 1955 and the following year they created Hidankyo, the nationwide Japan Confederation of A- & H-Bomb Sufferers' Organizations. But along their way they had to overcome the disempowering and pacifying Nagasaki narrative that was created with the deep involvement of the U.S. military.

Until the end of the U.S. formal occupation of Japan in 1952, it was forbidden for scientists, doctors or others to meet to learn about the causes of the suffering and diseases resulting from the A-bombs or to write about what had been inflicted on the two A-bombed cities. To prevent criticism of the United States, “materials related to the bombings that described or portrayed the human destruction in detail” were suppressed because they might “invite resentment.”⁴ Newspapers were censored and forbidden to have the kanji – language characters – for the words atom bomb. Film footage taken by Japanese journalists in the immediate aftermaths of the A-bombings was seized and hidden in a Pentagon vault for twenty years and other photos were suppressed, lest they be used in Soviet propaganda.

Even people's grieving was strictly controlled. Just outside the Hiroshima Peace Park is a monument that pictures three schoolgirls. One holds what appears to be an open book with Einstein's $E = MC^2$ formula in bold letters. The statue memorializes hundreds of girls who were vaporized by the A-bomb while creating firebreaks against the possibility that Hiroshima, like other Japanese cities, would suffer massive firebombing. To communicate that the memorial is dedicated to those children, military censorship had to be circumvented. Hence the code – $E = MC^2$.

Perhaps the most famous books about the Nagasaki A-bombing is Doctor Nagai Takashi's *Bells of Nagasaki*. Nagai was a devout Nagasaki Catholic, an anti-communist, and a doctor who cared for patients and wrote prolifically over the six years the he was dying from radiation inflicted leukemia. The Urakami district of Nagasaki, the epicenter of the A-bomb, was largely Catholic. And it was over the largest Catholic cathedral in Asia that the Fat Man plutonium A-bomb exploded.

The Bells of Nagasaki was the first Japanese published account of the A-bombings. Nagai taught that the Hibakusha should not feel anger. Instead, he preached that the A-bombing of Nagasaki was “God's Providence”, that the U.S. was not

⁴ Chad Diehl. *Resurrecting Nagasaki: Reconstruction and the Formation of Atomic Narratives.*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018, p. 100

to blame. He wrote that before the A-bombing, “Not a few cities were totally destroyed. But these were not suitable sacrifices, nor did God accept them. Only when Nagasaki was destroyed did God accept the sacrifice.”

Even this was not enough for the occupation authorities. They refused to allocate scarce paper, ink and glue for the book’s publication until Nagai consented to include the “Manila annex”, an unrelated account of Japan’s occupation and atrocities in the Philippines in order to demonstrate Japanese, not U.S., culpability. The book was then distributed across Japan by the tens of thousands, framing popular Japanese understandings of the A-bombings.

This book, combined with Urakami being a minority Catholic district, and the city father’s conservative strategy for winning government reconstruction funds, stacked the cards against the challenging truths of Yamiguchi, Taniguchi and other conscious Hibakusha, who were angry, in desperate need of medical and financial assistance, and committed to ensuring that no one else would suffer Hell on earth as they had.

Hibakusha suffered in near total silence until the first World Conference against A- & H-Bombs. The massive event arose out of what Japanese experienced as the third atom bombing: the catastrophic 1954 U.S. 15 megaton Bikini H-bomb test in the Pacific that irradiated and killed Marshall Islanders and Japanese fishermen, and poisoned much of Japan’s food supply.

It was at that first World Conference that a Hibakusha first spoke publicly. Misako Yamaguchi, an A-bomb Maiden, explained that she had “spent every day in great pain.” She could not remember how many times she had wanted to die and asked “if we [the Hibakusha] die, who would tell the world about our suffering.”

Following the conference, she invited Yamaguchi-san to join a small meeting of Hibakusha. He subsequently invited Taniguchi to join a meeting of 14 other A-bomb patients. And, in the months that followed the Nagasaki A-Bomb Maidens Association and the Nagasaki A-Bomb Youth Association, which included Yamaguchi and Taniguchi merged, laying the foundation for the creation of Hidankyo (the Japan Confederation of A- & H- Bomb Sufferers’ Organizations.) Their founding assembly issued three demands: development of the movement against A- & H- Bombs, promotion of government-funded medial treatment, and self-reliance for Hibakusha and compensation and support for bereaved Hibakusha families.

Senji was a force of nature, even known to escape hospitals to speak at conferences, including a World Conference and one that I organized at MIT. He is best known for two things. First is a photograph of his tortured face, published in a booklet by Hidankyo, which to this day is viewed in peace museums and books published around the world. Seeing his photo, you can understand why frightened young children ran from him, thinking he was a red devil.

The other was his powerful 1982 speech to the UN Second Special Session on Disarmament. Speaking from the General Assembly’s podium, Senji announced the

presentation of nearly **29 million** petition signatures urging nuclear weapons abolition. He made reference to his “unhealing scars” that all could see, and described having seen people with “extruded eyeballs ... and weeping young mothers frantically holding onto the lifeless, all but decapitated babies.” And, in his inimical way, he roared that “We can wait no longer,” pressing the call to educate the world’s people about the effects of the A-bombings, to negotiate an international convention outlawing the use of nuclear weapons as a crime against humanity, and to achieve a time bound nuclear disarmament treaty.

My favorite memory of Yamaguchi-san, which illuminates his place in Japanese culture and history, is from the official Nagasaki commemoration about 15 years ago. There wasn’t room in the Peace Park for the delegation I had joined to be seated, so we watched the ceremony on television. After Prime Minister Koizumi, hibakusha, the mayor, city council members, children and other dignitaries laid their memorial wreathes and made the symbolic offering of water for the spirits of the dead, and after the reading of the city’s official Peace Declaration, standing beneath one of the world’s ugliest statues Prime Minister Koizumi began his oration. Midway through his speech, the TV news anchor interrupted, saying “The Prime Minister is still speaking. We will now turn to interview Senji Yamiguchi, a leading Nagasaki Hibakusha to get his view on these events.” The prime minister of what was then the world’s second greatest economic power was cut off in mid-sentence on the country’s largest television network so that an abused and tortured prophetic peace activist could be interviewed. A Japanese friend whispered to me, “That’s Senji Yamaguchi!”

Taniguchi, in constant pain, was a more humble, shy and soft-spoken man. He preferred doing his movement building in the background. That changed in 1970, when one of the first color photos of a horribly wounded Hibakusha was published in Japan’s leading newspaper. It pictured a boy – Taniguchi-san - near death and featured his bloody crimson red back. The photo was taken from film shot in the Omura Naval hospital in 1946. As the image was broadcast on Japanese television and around the world, “Taniguchi Sumiteru with the reddened back” became famous across Japan and around the world.

This man, in constant pain and long reticent to tell his personal story, realized that once the photo of his tortured body had become an international icon he was obligated to become a public figure. His life was transformed a second time. He courageously pushed himself to speak to one journalist after another, accepting invitations to speak at meetings and rallies.

Excruciating pain was his companion as he traveled Japan and the world. Still he spoke humbly, but with unparalleled determination. Perhaps the highpoint for Taniguchi-san was addressing the 2005 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference from the same U.N. General Assembly podium from which his friend and mentor Senji Yamiguchi had addressed the 1982 Special Session.

Three striking images of Taniguchi-san remain with me, now that he is lost to us. First is the memory of Gensuikyo’s International Secretary introducing me to Taniguchi-san at a reception, telling me that he still had open wounds, and Taniguchi-san’s soft-spoken greeting and equally soft handshake. Second is of Taniguchi-san standing with George Martin as he patiently accepted an award that we presented to him during a New York conference on the eve of the 2015 NPT Review Conference. Last is of a happy man, singing and wearing a colorful hat

that had been given to him, as we closed a World Conference in Nagasaki. It brings tears to my eyes that midst it all, Taniguchi-san could smile, sing and feel joy.

Friends, today's average strategic nuclear weapon is twenty times more powerful than the two that savaged Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even a small exchange of 50-100 of the world's estimated 3,720 deployed strategic weapons could result in the immediate deaths of 20 million or more people, followed by the deaths of as many as two billion people as a result of the fires and smoke that would cause global cooling and a worldwide famine. Nearly all the nuclear powers have first strike doctrines. On at least 30 occasions since the Nagasaki A-bombing, during international crises and wars, the U.S. has prepared and/or threatened to initiate nuclear war. Every other nuclear weapons state has done so at least once. This is evil.

More, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* recently set the hands of their Doomsday Clock at 100 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to the end of all life as we know it. The U.S. and Chinese militaries confront one another in the South China Sea. And the world's nuclear powers are engaged in extremely dangerous arms races.

Senji Yamaguchi, Sumiteru Taniguchi and most of their friends and colleagues who launched the Hibakusha movement are no longer with us. With Hibakusha's average age now 83 years-old, they will not long be with us. It thus falls to us to find, imbibe and act from the spirits, courage and vision of Yamaguchi-san, Taniguchi-san and other inspiring Hibakusha.

Like Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein who urged that we "Remember our humanity and forget the rest", Hibakusha warn that "human beings and nuclear weapons cannot coexist." My hope is that with the dangers of nuclear war increasing, we will use this 75th anniversary to rededicate ourselves to the survival of our species and that we take every action we can to build the popular movements needed to create a nuclear weapons-free and sustainable world.