Message of a Second Generation Hibakusha

YAMADA Midori (Ms.)

I was born in Ono-cho in Hiroshima Prefecture in 1949. The town was 25 kilometers away from Hiroshima City, facing Miyajima Island, now known as a World Heritage site. Among the people of the small town in the Seto Inland Sea, the scars of the atomic bomb remain deep inside their minds. I am a second generation Hibakusha. In my family, my father and two brothers directly experienced the atomic bombing. Many of my elder cousins also fell victim to the bombing.

Back then, my father was a deputy mayor of Ono-cho Town. Informed about many people injured by the new-type bomb on Hiroshima, he joined the rescue corps and went back and forth between home and Hiroshima City for several days. From day one, he was exposed to the A-bomb residual radiation.

My father was very concerned about possible radiation effects on me. I was born after the atomic bombing. Whenever I was taken ill, he felt distress and blamed himself for having been in Hiroshima. He felt especially sad when I suffered from breast cancer at age 34.

My second brother was 13 years old and was a freshman in a middle school in Hiroshima City. On August 6, he and his classmates were mobilized to work on house demolition making firebreaks on the street which is now called Heiwa Odori Avenue, very close to what would become ground zero.

Morning roll-call finished and each student had just started to work in the assigned areas. The bomb came all of a sudden, at 8:15.

When he came to his senses, he found himself and other classmates trapped under a fallen building and surrounded by a sea of flames approaching. They desperately called for help to people running around trying to escape.

One soldier stopped and tried to help them, but in vain. These students encouraged each other and struggled to free themselves. Suddenly my brother’s body got loose, and he was able to escape by a hair’s breadth. But most of his classmates were consumed by the raging flames and died, which would torment my brother for the rest of his life.

When he finally managed to get home, his face was black with soot and was swollen like a balloon. My family had a hard time recognizing him. Day and night for three days, he related the hell on earth he had witnessed to the families and neighbors coming to his bedside. Then he fell into a deep sleep, hovering between life and death for three months before coming back to life. But the scar engraved on his mind did not heal, and he remained silent about his experiences from the A-bomb.
My eldest brother, who was in Hiroshima at age 16, still refuses to acknowledge the fact that he is a Hibakusha. He had been mobilized to work in a weapons factory in Hiroshima City. But he refuses to apply for a Hibakusha certificate, and rejects everything that happened in the past. Currently he is suffering from rectal cancer.

Some of you might have heard Hibakusha’s stories or seen painful scars on their bodies. I pay my deepest respect to many Hibakusha who courageously bear witness to their tragic experiences before the people of the world. And at the same time, I would like you to know that there are not a few Hibakusha, who have suffered and survived quietly through these years with deep scars in their mind, including my brothers. I believe it is my mission as a second generation Hibakusha, who has lived closest to the Hibakusha.

My brothers are not the only ones. Working as a counselor in the Tokyo Federation of A-bomb Survivors Organizations, I have met with many Hibakusha who are still suffering from illnesses, and also many second generation Hibakusha who live with constant fear over the possible effects of their parents’ A-bomb exposure on their own health, which is both surprising and painful.

The damage and aftereffects caused by the atomic bombs are not limited to what happened around August 6 in Hiroshima and August 9 in Nagasaki. They continue to threaten the survivors’ physical and living conditions deeply in different forms.

Nuclear weapons, therefore, not only harm people’s bodies but also deeply harm their minds even after 70 years since their use. These weapons must be abolished urgently.

We are now facing a historic opportunity at the United Nations, where the negotiations for a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons are going to start.

Calling for the conclusion of the treaty, the Hibakusha in Japan are working on the “International Signature Campaign in Support of the Appeal of the Hibakusha for the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.” The Hibakusha, whose average age has now exceeded 80 are calling on all the countries of the world to “prevent the repetition of the living hell on future generations” and “never to create any more Hibakusha.”

During the New Year, on January 6, many Hibakusha participated in the joint signature collection in front of Kaminarimon Gate of Asakusa, Tokyo, together with many peace workers. The surge of the international signature campaign is sweeping around Japan. We the second generation of the Hibakusha are also determined to develop this campaign far and wide across the world.

Contact: Tokyo Federation of A-Bomb Survivors Organizations (Toyukai)
2-4-4 Yushima, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-8464 Japan. Email: yamada@t-hibaku.jp