

My Memories at the Age of Five

By Setsuko Enya

In July 2008, my mother, with whom I spent most of my life, went to Heaven at the age of ninety-six. I believe that my mother saved my life.

I was five years old when the A-bomb exploded over Hiroshima. It was a summer morning, at 8:15 on August 6, 1945. We lived on the other side of the streetcar track, across from Hijiyama Shrine, in Danbara-cho (Minami-ku, Hijiyama-cho now). We were 1.6 km from the hypocenter. My father, who had returned from military service, was working at a power plant in the suburb of Saka-machi.

At the moment of the bomb, I didn't know what had happened. The roof of our house collapsed, and my small body was trapped in the debris. In the darkness, I was too terrified to think about anything. I didn't know how long I had been there, but suddenly light came from above, and my mother's powerful hand reached me and dragged me out. She also rescued my grandmother who was nearby. At the time my mother had been reading a newspaper in the veranda, and came rushing to me in the back parlor. Later my mother told me that I was in the gap between a half-fallen chest of drawers and debris. My sister was under the shoe locker in the hallway. My sister, Etsu-chan, born in 1943, was going to be two years old. My mother dragged her out, and we escaped the house. Etsu-chan had only a scratch near her eyebrows.

At first, my mother thought that it was only our house that was destroyed by a firebomb. It was not until she was outside, and seeing all of the houses around were gone, that she knew the entire city was destroyed.

When we came to the main street, she thought of her bag which contained valuables, and telling us to stay there, she went back to the house. Someone shouted to her, "Don't go, it's too

dangerous!” I can’t forget seeing the back of her as she was rushing toward our house, ignoring the warning. We saw fire burning and it was approaching. I clearly remember the frightful scene. Another mother in the neighborhood was leaving, screaming in a heartbreaking voice, saying that she was unable to save her child. My mother came back and we got to the streetcar track of Hijiyama Line. There we saw a procession of blackened people walking slowly with their hands held forward. Maybe it was because their skin was burned and hanging down.

We took refuge at nearby Hijiyama Hill. Mother carried my sister on her back, and I walked behind her. My grandmother was walking along with the grandmother of next-door neighbor. But they were separated from us on the way. When we got to the top of the hill, an enemy reconnaissance plane flew over us. Someone had a futon there, so we asked him to let us hide ourselves under the futon. Those on the enemy plane might have spotted figures trying to hide themselves under the white futon. We went down the hill and we came to the bottom, where we sat down and saw the looming mushroom cloud before us. Since then I can’t get rid of the memory of the eerie mushroom cloud that stayed still in the sky.

Injured people were being carried by two-wheeled carts or stretchers. Although injured people were everywhere, I can’t forget a particular girl. She was groaning in pain. I heard her sorrowful voice calling, “Mother! Mother!” The next morning my mother told me that she had died. Her sorrowful voice still lingers in my ear. That young girl, a victim of the war, cannot be wiped from my memory. Though I didn’t grasp the whole situation at the age of five, these miserable war-time experiences were stamped on my young heart and still remain there with powerful grief.

In the evening, we came across our lost grandmother, and my father. Father had returned from his workplace after hearing

the news of bombing. He had been looking for us around the city. Together we went to see our house. There was nothing left but smoldering debris. Someone dug in the ground and a man's dead body was exposed. My mother told me about a young mother with a baby on her back who was lying dead near Tamonin Temple at the foot of Hijiyama. In such circumstances, death was nothing unusual.

Later in the evening a truck came and rice balls were handed out. We spent the night sleeping out in the hedge along the path going up Hijiyama Hill.

The next day, we lodged in Tamonin Temple. It was filled with people who had lost their house. "Aki-chan's gone to Heaven!" the girl's mother said. Aki-chan was my age and my playmate. "I won't be able to play with her again." I thought, looking at the face of her mother, whose eyes were fixed on burning incense sticks. According to my mother, the roof of Tamonin Temple had blown off and at night we could see the stars in the sky. A kind neighborhood couple, who had often cared about us when air-raid sirens wailed, offered us lodging with them at the cottage of their acquaintance at Hijiyama. I saw their baby at the cottage. The baby was eating rice porridge from a big bowl for adults. The baby died shortly. Poor baby! I still have a dim recollection of the cute face of the baby.

Later we moved to the house of an employee of the electric power company in Saka-machi, Aki-gun. My father worked for the company.

My mother's blouse had been torn by the blast. She borrowed a green blouse with white polka-dot from her friend in Ujina. My mother made rounds of courtesy calls in that blouse. She later returned the blouse to the friend, who accepted its return. Much later, at the age of 85, the friend said that she should have given it to my mother. My mother did not dare to ask for it then. A mere blouse had weighed on her conscience, and my mother

remembered it for such a long time. It is unimaginable now.

With my father working for the electric power company, eight of us - Mom, Grandma, little sister, two little brothers born after the war, and my cousin, lived a humble, though happy life. My father was an only child, but my mother had a lot of brothers and sisters. From her home-town in Omishima, Ehime Prefecture, a total of six cousins and aunts came one by one to Hiroshima, turning to my mother and lived with us. My grandmother and my father welcomed them and were happy to live together. I called one cousin "Big Sis", and treated her as if she were my own sister. She was good at dressmaking and was tailoring for Hitsujiya. She often made matching dresses for me and my younger sister. I think they were rather fashionable in those days. We often heard compliments like, "You're so cute."

In 1952, my sister, Etsu-chan, was in the third grade. She took after our mother and was a very fast runner. She was practicing for the coming sports day. I was a new comer in the first year at Jogakuin Junior High School. Etsu-chan in the third grade was almost as tall as I in the seventh grade. Etsu-chan was fair-skinned and good looking with large eyes and sharp eyebrows. She was tall and I thought she had inherited every good feature of our parents. I remember that my mother would often say, "Etsuko needs goat milk." My parents were aware that Etsu-chan tired easily, though she was a cheerful, sport-loving girl. On September 25, she had a sudden high fever of 40 degrees centigrade. We sent for the power plant doctor. The next morning, as her temperature was down, when I said to Etsu-chan, "I'm leaving for school", she said to me, "Have a good time." Those were the last words of Etsu-chan. After school my cousin met me at Hiroshima Station. She said we must go home quick because she had received a call from my father. We got on a bus in front of the station and hurried home. There we learned that she had died. My mother told me that Etsu-chan had just died peacefully while she was receiving Ringer's lactate. My

cousin and I collapsed in the front hall and wept mournfully. My sister no longer smiled at me, she laid there with her eyes closed. The sorrow remained long in the heart of our family. It was an ultimate point of our sorrow. “Why Etsu-chan! It should be me.” I thought. My grandmother also said, “I wish I could take her place.”

My sister had an unexpected high fever one night and the next day, she passed away. It was all too soon. She was diagnosed as “autotoxemia”, but the real cause of her death remained uncertain. I wished she had survived long enough to receive various medications. I told myself that I would try hard to live my life as fully as I could. I wanted to cover Etsu-chan’s life, too. My parents did not say too much about Etsu-chan except that she was a lovely girl. I know how deep their grief was.

In 1947 when I was in the second grade, one of my classmates, Asako died suddenly. She suffered A-bomb exposure in the city and lost her father. She was living in Saka-machi with her mother and her brother. A friend told me that Asako-chan had died after vomiting blood as thick as crayon. Etsu-chan and Asako-chan died from after-effects of the A-bomb. Asako’s mother gave me a picture of Asako enlarged from the commemorative photo of elementary school entrance ceremony, saying “Please remember Asako.” The commemorative photo was the only picture of her left. All the other photos were burned by the A-bomb. It was given to me when her mother and I met by chance some years later, and I laid the picture up in lavender. “Please tell many people about me”, Asako seemed to be begging me. Children’s Peace Monument was erected to remember Sadako Sasaki. It also commemorates the sorrow of numerous children deprived of their young lives.

In 1952, my sister, Etsu-chan died, later my grandmother died at the age of 88, and my father at the age of 91. My mother, who was 33 years young at the time of A-bombing, passed away in

2008 at the age of 96. I am the only one left among the five family members exposed to the A-bombing. I always think that I owe my life to my mother, who dragged me out from the dark gap of debris. I believe it is my mission to speak out the fact that many innocent children, civilians young and old, citizens and foreigners were killed by the A-bomb. Even now I feel as if my mother is pushing my back, encouraging me to tell my A-bomb experiences.