

SPECIAL- Visiting the statues of Shinran Shonin

On that day, one single atomic bomb devastated the entire city of Hiroshima and fourteen thousand human lives were lost. A statue of Shinran Shonin standing on the hill 2.5 km away from the hypocenter was also exposed to the radiation. After the war, the statue was sent to New York. In Hiroshima, there is a man who continues to think about the statue and his granddaughter, who engages in peace activities. This is a report on their aspiration for peace.

~~No More Hiroshimas~~

The Shinran Shonin statue once stood on the Hijirigaoka hill (Mitaki-cho, Nishi-ku), which overlooks Hiroshima city. An Osaka metal founder, the late Seiichi HIROSE, who was a devout Jodo Shinshu follower, purchased a parcel of land on the hill and donated the statue that he had cast at his factory.

According to the limited information that was available, the statue was hauled by train from Osaka to Yokogawa Station in Hiroshima, then loaded onto an oxcart and transported to Hijirigaoka hill. Before going there, however, the statue was taken to Hiroshima Betsuin where it was welcomed by a huge crowd of people. (photo below)

During World War II, many metal products were confiscated by the military for the production of ammunition. However, due to the locale's strong protest and resistance, this statue was exempted and not taken. On August 6, 1945 when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, the statue standing there on the hill was directly exposed to the radiation of the blast. Instantaneously, the bamboo forests and mountains surrounding the statue went up in flames.

Five years later, at Hirose's request, the statue was donated to the American Buddhist Study Academy in New York. Mr. Hirose wrote to the late Rev. Hozen Seki (the then ABSA president and resident minister of the New York Buddhist Church) who was from Hiroshima, stating, "Shinran Shonin aspired for a truly peaceful society that was free of war. I would like to send this statue of Shinran Shonin to New York where the UN headquarters is located. Through the statue, I would like to make the appeal of NO MORE HIROSHIMAS to the world."



Statue at NY Buddhist Church



Kazuho KUBOTA with her grandfather, Takeharu OKUDA

Transmitting history from grandfather to granddaughter

Hiroshima Betsuin where it was welcomed by a huge crowd of people. (photo below)

Visiting the A-bomb damaged statue in New York

Reunion with the statue

For the citizens of Hiroshima, this statue that survived the atomic bomb is very special. Mr. Takeharu OKUDA is one of those who has a special, emotional attachment to it. Okuda is also an A-bomb survivor, who is a member of the Saihoji Temple in Asakita Section, Hiroshima. He is now 87 years old.

His home was located near Yokogawa Station and Hijirigaoka hill was one of the areas where he went to play in his childhood. After the end of the war, he moved from Hiroshima due to his work. He did not know that the statue had been taken to New York until he read about it in the newspaper. "Since then, I had always dreamed of visiting the statue in New York, but I have never been able to do so."

This spring, his granddaughter, Kazuho KUBOTA (senior at Hiroshima Jogakuin High School), told him that she was going to New York. Kazuho is a member of the school's Signature Collecting Committee for the Nuclear Weapons Convention and has been actively promoting this campaign in the area of the Atomic Bomb Dome in the Peace Park. In April, an event called the Youth Forum in which youth give presentations on their activities for the abolition of nuclear weapons was hosted by the United Nations headquarters. Kazuho was one of the eight members who represented Japanese high school students.

Mr. Okuda hastily compiled the data on the Shinran statue in a booklet and handed it to Kazuho saying, "Please go and see the statue for me."

The mind of an eighteen year old girl

Kazuho's involvement in the campaign started with her hearing the stories and experiences of A-bomb survivors that were repeatedly shared at her school.

Kazuho said "My school is located near the hypocenter and 330 students and teachers perished in the blast. The students were the same age as I am now. Each one had family, friends, and dreams for the future, and I am sure that they didn't want to lose them. When I seriously think about them and imagine how they must have felt, their words penetrate my heart."

She continues "We may be the last generation who are able to listen to the victims' stories first hand. Because of that, I feel we have an obligation to them to keep their stories and messages alive, not allowing them to simply fade away. As the youth living in this city, I believe we are the only ones who are enabled to accept and fulfill this great responsibility that Hiroshima has. This is the very motive for my participation in these activities."

In 1945, Okuda was 18 years old, the same age as Kazuho is now. He belonged to the naval facility department and was stationed in Kure, Hiroshima. In March of that year, young men who were 18 years old were being enlisted into military service by the government. From August 1, he began naval cadet training to become a soldier. In recalling those days, Okuda commented, "I thought I would have less than a half a year to live."

"On August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. On the following day, I was told by a naval officer who was an acquaintance of mine that my father had died in the bombing, and a week later, on August 13, I was finally allowed to enter the city to return to my home and neighborhood. But there was nothing left—everything had been destroyed and was merely burned ruins." After saying this, Okuda fell silent. Kazuho continued, "My grandfather was a *hibakusha*, a radiation victim as well, but he was exposed to it when he visited the city immediately after the attack. He didn't experience the bombing firsthand, and I guess that is why he doesn't want to talk about it...."

Aspiration for peace found in the pedestal

Just before August 6, Okuda and Kazuho visited Hijirigaoka hill where the pedestal still remains. (upper right photo)

"The statue had a number of burn scars. I heard that it still emits a minute quantity of radiation. To me, its enduring appearance seemed to be quietly calling for No More Hiroshimas. The encounter with the statue has made my aspiration for peace even more solid. Thank you for suggesting that I go to see it," Kazuho told her grandfather. "Take good care of this pedestal as a precious symbol and reminder, and continue endeavoring for peace in the world," Okuda responded as he lovingly gazed at his granddaughter.

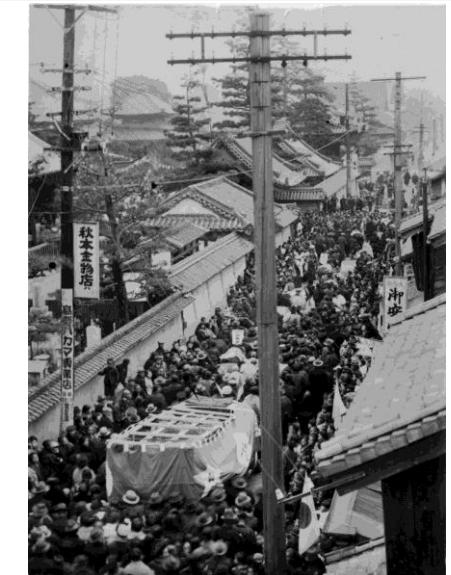


Children doing radio calisthenics in front of the statue on Hijirigaoka hill in 1941

Seiichi HIROSE (1896–1979) encountered the Jodo Shinshu path on the occasion of his son's death and began listening to the Dharma. An idea occurred to him and he casted six bronze statues of Shinran Shonin in a traveling outfit to represent each character of the Buddha's Name, 南無阿彌陀仏 Na-mo-a-mi-da-butsu, and donated them to the temples in Tokyo, Niigata, Mie, Kyoto, Osaka, and Hiroshima.

The recipient in Kyoto is the Suminobo Temple where Shinran passed away. During World War II, the statue was confiscated and collected for ammunition production, but one portion, the woven hat on top, was returned after the war. The hat now hangs on the side of the temple gate. The other recipients are Zempukuji Temple in Minato, Tokyo and Gochikokubunji Temple in Joetsu, Niigata where the Takenouchi Cottage that Shinran once resided in soon after his exile is believed to have been situated. As for Mie, where Mr. Hirose was from, the statue is located at Shinshu Otani-ha Kuwana Betsuin. Fortunately, the Kuwana Betsuin statue was exempted and not confiscated, but the woven hat was damaged during an air raid in 1945 and the bullet hole is still visible.

NOTE: The recipient of the statue in Osaka is unknown. Any information regarding this matter is appreciated.
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Crowd gathers to welcome the statue arriving at Hiroshima Betsuin in 1937