

# Remembering Hiroshima: Masako's story as told to her daughter

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Monday, August 6, 1945, 8:15am. My 15-year-old sister, Yoneko, was already at school doing morning *taiso* exercises in the yard; 13-year-old brother, Satoru, was with his middle school classmates at their civic duty site doing chores. I was 23, at home alone after the others had gone, washing the morning dishes at the kitchen sink, a mile from Sangyo Shorei Kan, the Trade Promotion Hall.

Suddenly I saw a blinding flash and knew instinctively to run toward the center of the house. Even as I turned, there was a deafening noise and the house collapsed on top of me. Laying there, the nembutsu was all I could say, over and over. I heard a sound like rolling thunder, going on and on. After everything stopped, I struggled out of the rubble. My ankle was bleeding and my left wrist bone was exposed, blood spurting everywhere. I found two rags and bound them as best I could. I grabbed the parcel bag containing important papers and left. Surprisingly, I was not afraid, and felt instead a deep calm that I credit to a connection to hotoke-sama, Amida Buddha. Death was very near and yet I had no fear in that moment.



Masako's family circa 1937. Masako is in the back row second from the left. Yoneko is front row center, Satoru is front row far right.

Once outside I couldn't believe the sight before me. In every direction all the houses as far as I could see were leveled. I could smell smoke in the air, and I knew I had to leave the city as soon as possible. I headed to the north-east towards Niho, past Hijiyama Mountain, where I had friends living on the outskirts of town, three to four miles away. I passed sites I will never forget. A woman was circling the ruins of her house and calling out for her elderly mother. A woman was trying to coax her child to her, but he wouldn't come because she looked so frightening. Hiroshima is built on a delta of five rivers, and I worried that the bridges would be out. As I crossed over one river it was filled with black mud and debris. I learned later that these rivers filled with thousands of survivors trying to find relief from their burns and it is where most of them died.

After walking about three miles, I made my way to my friend, Nishimoto-san's house, and knocked on her door. When she answered she was so frightened by my appearance that she slammed the door in my face, afraid to let me in. I must have been a sight—torn and filthy clothes, my body covered in ash and debris, my hair sticking straight up. Too weary to try again, I turned and walked to Takeuchi-san's house, where I collapsed. Three days later I found myself in a makeshift hospital in a mountain cave. I had lost a lot of blood and my white cell count was dangerously low. It was there that I heard of the bombing of Nagasaki and, a week later, the previously never-before-heard voice of the emperor telling us, "we must endure the unendurable," as Japan surrendered.

Indeed, the years both before and after were extremely hard. In 1935 my sister and I were sent to study in Japan; the country had been continuously at war since 1931. We were always hungry. By 1945 most of the men were gone and all that remained in the city were women, children and the elderly. In the aftermath of the bomb, the smell of cremated bodies hung over the city for years as people continued to die from their injuries and radiation sickness.

My sister, Yoneko, died, as did anyone who had been outside. A one-hour delay would have put students indoors and many more would have survived. We were told she lingered for three days at the relocation site she was taken to. My father searched for her but only discovered her whereabouts after her death. He was given her school uniform and a container they said contained her ashes. Satoru's school duty that morning took him past ground zero just ten minutes before the explosion. He was less than a mile away but was saved by the protection of a concrete building. My house was a mile from ground zero. As I turned away from the kitchen window the blast pelted my back with shattered glass, fragments of which still remain in my body.

In September I will turn one hundred one. I have never had any bitterness or anger about the bombing of Hiroshima, although the death of so many, including my sister, will always be a source of sadness. The teachings have taught me that the causes and

conditions that led to that moment are too numerous to calculate and assigning blame or bitterness is impossible. At the cost of so many lives, the world learned many



Masako carrying a 4-pound box of chocolates on her 100th birthday. (2021)

valuable lessons from that day. The A-Bomb completely altered my life, but the Buddhadharma and shinjin allowed me to move

forward and find a meaningful life nonetheless. As I reflect on that day and every day since, I have a deep sense of gratitude for the life the nembutsu has given me. I have always told my children that I am the luckiest person in the world, grateful for all that I have received, despite and because of my undeserving foolish self.

Namoamidabutsu.

#### **About the Author**

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Masako with her daughter and her family, 2016.