

# SILENT THUNDER

by Nagasaki branch of the Japanese Study Group of Sign Language Problems

## Nagasaki

Nagasaki is a port city located on Kyushu Island at the westernmost extremity of the Japanese archipelago. It was opened more than 400 years ago and flourished as a base for Portuguese merchants and missionaries.

During the long years of national isolation (1641-1858), Nagasaki was the only port in Japan open for foreign trade. Ships from China and Holland sailed into its harbor and created here an international atmosphere unknown in other parts of the country.

Nagasaki is also a city of faith. Thousands of people were baptized by the European Jesuits who were active here in the early part of the city's history. For a short time (1580-1588), Nagasaki even came under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church. In the early 17th century, however, a national ban on Christianity was promulgated and believers were prosecuted. When religious freedom was finally granted again after the Meiji Restoration (1868), believers increased and churches were built all over the country. Still today, Nagasaki has the largest number of Christian churches in Japan.

With the approach of World War II, Nagasaki became an arms manufacturing center. Shipyards producing warships lined the harborfront and torpedo factories stood side by side in the northern sector of the city which for centuries had been the home of the Christian faithful. In the center of that area stood the Urakami Cathedral, the largest church in the Orient at the time. The atomic bomb fell very close to this church, destroying everything in sight and snuffing out thousands of human lives.

## The Damage Caused by the Atomic Bomb

The atomic bomb that exploded suddenly in the sky over Nagasaki caused far more devastating, general and enduring damage to human beings than any weapon ever used before in history. All systems in the city came to an abrupt standstill. The three basic necessities of life—clothing, food and shelter—were suddenly unavailable. The means and the energy for transportation were gone.

The damages to the human body caused by the atomic bomb can be divided into two main categories according to the time of appearance: acute atomic bomb injuries and atomic bomb aftereffects.

### Acute Atomic Bomb Injuries (from 0 to 4 months after the bombing)

Thousands of people died instantly from burns and external injuries caused by the ferocious heat and blast generated by the atomic bomb explosion. Moreover, many people were exposed to fatal doses of radiation. Among those who managed to survive at first, the combined effects of burns, external injuries and radiation exposure caused the aggravation of symptoms, damage to internal organs and finally death within a few days or weeks. Radiation-induced disorders are peculiar to the atomic bomb, and the scourge of radiation exposure was not limited to the people exposed directly to the explosion. It also appeared in people who came into the hypocenter area shortly after the explosion or who participated in relief activities and the disposal of corpses. Their diseases were the result of "residual" radiation.

### Atomic Bomb Aftereffects

Several other radiation-induced dis-

orders appeared during the period three to four weeks after the bombing. These included general fatigue, high fever, and also bloody stools caused by damage to the intestinal tract. Moreover, many people lost their hair during this period because of damage to the hair roots.

The blood-forming tissues are particularly sensitive to the effects of radiation. The production of white blood cells was obstructed and immunity decreased, making the exposed victims susceptible to infection by bacteria. Consequently, there was a high incidence of complications such as pneumonia, pyelitis and blood poisoning.

After two months, jaundice appeared in many survivors as a result of damage to the cells of the liver. Some people developed dropsical swellings all over their bodies or suffered from anuria (urinary obstruction). However, the number of deaths gradually decreased and many of the people who had managed to survive this long started on the road to recovery.

Radiation-induced aftereffects continue to cause suffering even today. It has been reported that atomic bomb survivors are more prone to malignant tumors than other people. A dark shadow of apprehension about the possibility of developing cancer looms over the minds of the atomic bomb survivors.

### **The Atomic Bombing of Nagasaki**

The world's second atomic bombing devastated the city of Nagasaki. The tide of war had turned against Japan and from the beginning of 1945 the situation deteriorated swiftly. The American army intended to drop the atomic bomb on Japan without warning at the earliest possible date, hoping that the use of this fearful weapon would shock the Japanese government into surrender.

On August 6, 1945 an atomic bomb exploded over a populated area—Hiroshima for the first time in human history and caused enormous and unprecedented damage. Japan's surrender was only a matter of time. Three days later, a B29 bomber, nicknamed "Bockscar" and loaded with

another atomic bomb, rose into the predawn darkness from the runway on Tinian Island in the Marianas. The crew consisted of Major James Sweeney as commander and 12 other specially trained air force officers. The Bockscar rendezvoused with an observation plane over the southern Japanese island of Yakushima and then flew in double formation into the sky over Kokura, an industrial center on the northern coast of Kyushu and the primary bombing target, at about 9:50 a.m. Despite several turns over the city, however, the crew could not locate the designated bombing point because of cloud cover and smoke drifting up from the Yahata Steel Works, which had been bombed in a conventional air raid two days earlier. Meanwhile, anti-aircraft fire began to reach up into the sky and combat planes could be seen coming, so Major Sweeney abandoned the primary target and turned his aircraft toward Nagasaki.

The two B29 bombers traveled west over the northern part of Kumamoto, crossed the Ariake Sea and Shimabara Peninsula, and finally reached Nagasaki around 11:00 a.m. By that time, the routine air-raid alarm had been lifted and the people of Nagasaki were back in their workplaces and schools. Looking through his sights, the bombardier caught a glimpse of the Mitsubishi Nagasaki Arms Factory through a crack in the clouds and pushed the button that released the bomb into the summer sky. It plunged downward and exploded in midair at 11:02 a.m.

### **Crossing the Atomic Wasteland**

The record of Tsukasa Kikuchi

#### **1. His Childhood**

Tsukasa Kikuchi was born in Umamachi, Nagasaki (near the Suwa Shinto Shrine) on November 17, 1913, the first son of the Kikuchi family. The fact that his parents had been hoping for a male child only increased their joy at the birth of a healthy baby.

At the age of three, however, Tsukasa almost died from a combination of mal-

nutrition and a soaring fever caused by inflammation of the middle ear, and despite his mother's conscientious nursing, he lost the ability to hear.

In 1922, when Tsukasa was nine years old, he entered the newly founded Nagasaki School for the Blind and Deaf. At first he was completely bewildered by Japanese composition and arithmetic, and the only lessons he enjoyed were drawing and physical education. He spent two years each in the 1st and 2nd grades, and by the time he entered the 3rd grade he finally learned to enjoy his Japanese lessons.

The middle school vocational course was divided into three sub-courses: woodworking, Japanese dressmaking and Western-style dressmaking. Tsukasa chose the woodworking course, agreeing with his advisors that as long as he had a skill he would never go hungry, even though he could not hear.

Tsukasa showed several photographs to the sign language interpreters recording his experience. The photographs showed Tsukasa in a state of physical health hard to imagine when looking at him today. They were taken when he was young and active as a track and field runner. His shoulders were broad, his muscles lean and strong, and he was running and jumping with great agility.

He had become interested in track and field while in middle school and practiced hard everyday after classes, finally being able to run the 100 meter dash in 12 seconds and making a good showing in the shot-put and hurdles events at numerous competitions. After graduation, he continued to practice enthusiastically and also supervised the training of younger students. Once, he even went to Tokyo by himself after reading in the bulletin of the Japanese Association of the Deaf and Dumb that a national track and field meet would be held there.

Later, during the three years he worked in Tokyo, he joined the Association of the Deaf and Dumb and made close friends with other members interested in running.

Tsukasa graduated from school in 1932

at the age of 19 after attaining excellent woodworking skills during the three-year course. However, he and his parents were apprehensive at the prospect of his going out alone into society. Deciding to work at home, he gathered orders from his father's fellow workers or friends and built a small woodworking shop in his house.

After about a year, however, he began to realize that he could not stay under his parents' wing forever and, with his father's encouragement, decided to find a job in Tokyo.

He was hired by another deaf person operating a furniture factory in Nakano Ward, Tokyo, and took up new duties in the factory workshop. Almost all the work done there was filling orders made by the Sanjo Furniture Store, one of the largest of its kind in Tokyo. An atmosphere of friendship and unity enveloped the workshop, which was manned by deaf craftsmen from all over Japan.

Tsukasa's life during these three years in Tokyo was a busy schedule of work and recreation, and he returned to Nagasaki with new knowledge and many new skills. In Nagasaki he was hired by the Shigematsu Furniture Factory, but work was still being carried out there by primitive methods. When he attempted to introduce his newly learned techniques he confronted protests from the other craftsmen, who treated him coldly because he was deaf.

He endured this and worked hard at the factory for four years, but after hearing about the friendly and happy atmosphere at the steel foundry where his friends worked and being constantly beckoned by them, he decided to hand in his resignation. In 1941, he started a new job at the Sonoda Steel Works, a subsidiary company of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, in Michino'o on the outskirts of Nagasaki. That factory was producing equipment for warships, torpedoes and other weapons. With his natural abilities, Tsukasa quickly accustomed himself to lathing and other new and difficult tasks, and because of the kindness of his fellow workers he was happy and comfortable in his new workplace. Little by little,

he developed into a skilled latheman.

In 1943 he married a deaf woman named Mitsue Inomata, who lived near the Urakami Catholic Church in the northern part of Nagasaki.

Mitsue was a reliable and gentle-hearted girl, and very much attached to her husband. No one would ever have disagreed that they made a good-looking and well-matched couple.

In June of the following year, Mitsue gave birth to a son.

## 2. The Morning of That Day

Tsukasa left his house in Uma-machi on the morning of August 9, 1945 and boarded the streetcar in front of Suwa Shrine. Ordinarily he would take the streetcar only as far as Nagasaki Station, then catch the train for Michino'o, but today he planned to visit the dentist before going to work. He had been suffering from a toothache for several days and had received permission from the foreman at the steel works to go for treatment. He went to the Nakao Dental Clinic, an old wooden building near the Matsuyama streetcar stop, but had to sit for an hour in the stifling heat of the waiting room before seeing the dentist.

After leaving the clinic he walked back to Urakami Station and boarded a train for Michino'o. Soon after pulling out of the station, however, the train collided with a car at a railway crossing. The accident was fairly serious, but numerous people rushed to the site and the train was able to move again after several hectic minutes. The time was about 10:45 a.m. Little did Tsukasa know that his life had been saved.

"If the train had been held up longer by that accident," says Tsukasa today, "I wouldn't be alive now because it occurred near the Matsuyama streetcar stop, only a few meters from the hypocenter of the atomic bomb explosion."

The Sonoda Steel Works was located close to Michino'o Station, the next stop along the line after Urakami.

Tsukasa arrived at the Sonoda Steel Works about 11:00 a.m., changed into his work clothes, and then went to wash his

hands. In those days, the trains were pulled by steam locomotives belching dense clouds of coal smoke. The hands and faces of the passengers became soiled even after a short ride.

## 3. 11:02 a.m.

Tsukasa was standing in front of an outdoor washbasin when the atomic bomb exploded. For an instant he was blinded by a flash of light like a lightning bolt, and then looked up toward the sky in shock.

"I felt a wave of pressure hit my eardrums like an echoing slap across the face, and then a strange tingling sensation as though my hair was standing on end. I had no idea what was going on. "It occurred to Tsukasa that he should seek shelter and he glanced around, but all at once he was assailed from behind by a fierce blast of wind, and a scrap of iron debris slammed into his back.

"I was thrown about seven meters away from where I had been standing. The rounded deformity of my back now is from the wound I received at the time of the bombing." Tsukasa was slapped against the ground and his heart seemed to stop beating. At the same time, a stinging bolt of pain shot through his body and he was seized with a sudden and all-consuming fear of death.

"I couldn't see anything because of the blast of air and debris. After a few minutes I looked up toward the sky but there was no sign of airplanes. I thought it very strange. Before long a tall mushroom cloud rose up into the sky." Except for the blow to his back, Tsukasa had escaped injury and he gradually regained his senses.

"The roof of the factory had been blown off and the bare iron framing was twisted out of shape. Many of my fellow workers were pinned under fallen machinery or injured by flying debris. It was an unbelievable sight—people with broken arms and legs, people bleeding from open gashes caused by glass splinters or lathe shavings ....

If fact, all 25 workers in the Sonoda Steel Works suffered injuries of varying sever-

ity. Although located more than five kilometers from the hypocenter, the building was terribly damaged. After the initial confusion had subsided, the foreman shouted, "It's dangerous to leave the factory, so everyone stay here for the time being." For the next eight hours Tsukasa and his fellow workers sat inside the building, going out from time to time to look at the surroundings. They had had nothing to eat and felt completely drained of energy. As their sense of perception gradually fogged over, it became difficult to tell what was reality and what was mere illusion.

#### 4. Returning Home

"You'd better stay a little longer,"

Warned his fellow workers as he headed toward the door. But Tsukasa ignored their advice and left the building around 7:30 p.m.

"I was so worried about my family that I couldn't stay there another minute."

Tsukasa went to the railway station but there was no sign of trains and so he decided to walk to Nagasaki. During his years at the School for the Blind and Deaf he had often walked along these same tracks on excursions with his friends. He had many fond memories of those trips: picking wild flowers and field horsetails and laughing in the gentle sunshine

Now, however, the tracks and the land beside them had completely changed. The ground was scorched and bare, and the few plants that had managed to remain were flattened, discolored and smoldering. Further along he noticed two dead bodies lying beside the tracks. He could only bow reverently in their direction and then continue his journey at as quick a pace as possible. The mountains that rose up around him were strangely reddish-brown in color as though all the trees had suddenly withered. In particular, the mountainsides facing toward Nagasaki were robbed of all greenery and smoke was churning up from patches of fire.

A mass of victims, indistinguishable as men or women, trudged along, struggling slowly over the railroad embankment and

then descending to the creek running below it. Tsukasa guessed that they were the girls working as mobilized student laborers in the Sumiyoshi Tunnel Factory. The girls splashed water on their heads and arms and tried in vain to mend their wounds. A large number of corpses were already lying face down in the murky water.

"I don't know if they were thirsty or if they were trying to wash their wounds, but hundreds of people poured down toward that tiny river."

At another point along the tracks a mother lay with a dead baby in her arms. Many other people lay scattered over the tracks or along the gravel embankments. Some were still breathing and groaning, "Help me, please help me!", but there was nothing Tsukasa could do for them.

"I gazed at them helpless and dazed. The only thing I could do was bow deeply as I walked past."

Heat and fatigue blurred his mind. He became so robbed of energy that he could neither think nor feel. He just trudged forward, pulled like a puppet by some unknown force. Everywhere he looked there were people sprawled motionless on the ground. Coming this far, Tsukasa had lost all sense of revulsion or shock, no matter how many blackened corpses appeared before his eyes. He just walked along the tracks dazed and unperturbed.

The contorted carcass of the Mitsubishi Arms Factory in Ohashi was burning wildly. In those days the houses from Sumiyoshi to Iwayabashi were interspersed with rice paddies. The sun was setting when he passed that area and a gloomy veil of darkness was gradually descending. He saw white smoke drifting across the ravaged paddies and blackened stumps of rice smoldering like tiny chimneys. The rice stalks that had avoided the fire were lying flat on the ground pointing away from the hypocenter and clearly revealing the effect of the blast wind. Even the rice paddies were scattered with corpses like black lumps of charcoal on the ground.

"I seemed to be the only person walking. I met one apparently uninjured person com-



ing away from the Ohashi area, but otherwise there wasn't even a cat or dog that could walk normally."

Tsukasa thought that a massive air raid had taken place over a large area, but as he traveled from Michino'o through Sumiyoshi and Ohashi, he noticed that the damage to people and things grew more and more severe. The Matsuyama neighborhood was still burning and he thought to himself blankly that perhaps the air raid had been concentrated here.

When he reached the iron bridge spanning the Urakami River at Ohashi, he saw that the other bank was a raging sea of fire. Buildings had all collapsed and burned and the fire had spread to telephone poles, fences and trees. Evening had already set in, but the fires were so tempestuous that it seemed like midday.

Tsukasa stood at the end of the iron bridge and gazed at the conflagration on the other bank. The bridge was so damaged that it looked as though it would give way even under the weight of a single person. Yet, he could not pass along the road and he had no intention to go back.

On the knolls beside the water under the bridge, hundreds of corpses lay piled upon each other. One corpse was floating in the river with only the face protruding from the surface of the water. It was surrounded by numerous other blackened and mutilated bodies. Tsukasa could not tell if they

were men or women.

A nauseating stench wafted upward, and thoughts of his family raced across Tsukasa's mind. Almost unconsciously, he put one foot forward, drawn again by the strange unknown force that had been guiding him all day. Before he knew it he found himself on the other side of bridge.

Even though he had hardly even noticed himself doing it, the fact that he had managed to traverse that 30 meter-long bridge is amazing indeed. It gave him new courage in the midst of that unbelievable carnage and chaos.

## 5. The Hypocenter

In the Matsuyama district, even the ground had changed to a strange shade of reddish-brown and the air shimmered violently with heat. It was nothing less than a cataclysmic fire storm.

Walking was an excruciating task. Tsukasa had to stop time and time again, crouch down and rest, then continue his journey.

"The temperature must have been over 50°C. I was able to walk because I was wearing thick-soled leather boots. If I had worn rubber or plastic shoes they surely would have melted."

"The dentist's clinic near Matsuyama streetcar stop, which I had visited that morning, was gone without a trace."

The family home of Tsukasa's wife Mitsue was only about 600 meters from the site of the dentist's clinic, but the whole area was a sea of fire. Tsukasa looked anxiously in that direction, but all he could do was pray for the safety of Mitsue's family and hurry along toward his house in Uma-machi.

Tsukasa found out later that Mitsue's mother and older sister had been at home on that day. Her mother had been preparing lunch in the kitchen and died instantly in the explosion. By mere coincidence Sachie had been in a nearby air-raid shelter and miraculously survived. However, the shelter was close to the hypocenter and the area had been severely contaminated with residual radiation. She died several days

later while resting in a place called Fukuda near Nagasaki. The kind and loving sister who had brought Tsukasa and Mitsue together ....

The Matsuyama sports field (the present Nagasaki Municipal Track and Field) was strewn with the corpses of people who had been doing drills in the use of bamboo spears. Their hair was burned off and their skin was scorched bright red.

"They were so disfigured that it was impossible to distinguish between men and women, but the expression of fright and surprise at the time of the explosion was frozen on all the dead faces. They gazed up toward the sky with arms stretched outward. People who had been sitting were still in a posture of sitting, people who had been moving were locked in movement like photographs, and all of them were hideously burned.

"There were countless numbers of corpses. Eyes had been ripped out of sockets and internal organs were spilled all over the ground. There were so many corpses that I couldn't cross the field without stepping on them.

"Again and again, fires nearby rose up like red cyclones, fanned by the wind, and sprayed me with showers of sparks."

The situation was the same all the way to Iwakawa-machi. The railroad at this point was blocked by heaps of contorted iron framing from collapsed buildings, and so Tsukasa returned once more to the road. It was scattered with the bloated corpses of humans and animals.

It was 10:30 p.m. when he finally reached his house.

"I found my wife and son (then eight months old) alive and safe, and we embraced in a frenzy of joy and relief."

## 6. After the War

Tsukasa was informed of Japan's surrender by his parents.

"Rumors went around that the American soldiers would attack Japanese women. We lived in dread and apprehension, never knowing what would happen. Still, I was happy that the war was over and that we

could finally return to a peaceful and regular way of life."

In the chaos after the war there were very few paying jobs even for able-bodied people, let alone for the deaf and dumb. Tsukasa, Mitsue and their son took up temporary lodgings in the home of Tsukasa's parents.

When the occupation forces arrived in Nagasaki and began the work of restoration, Tsukasa managed to find a job as woodworker, although the pay was only ten yen and a loaf of bread a day. American soldiers supervised the work. The soldiers that everyone had expected to be cruel turned out to be kind and generous. They showed understanding for the deaf, perhaps, thought Tsukasa, because of their knowledge of Helen Keller and her struggle. Many of them presumed mistakenly that Tsukasa had lost his hearing in the atomic bombing, and this helped to make things easier for him.

"I often communicated with the soldiers through simple sign language. Sometimes they gave me food, clothing and even shoes, probably out of pity. I will never forget the destruction caused by the atomic bomb, but I have no grudge against those soldiers. They were kind and good."

Four months later, the project Tsukasa was working on came to completion. The following year he was out of work. Finally, he landed a permanent job at Nagasaki Ship Fixtures, a company that made furniture and equipment for use inside ships. Several other deaf people were working there. Tsukasa took up his new duties as a member of a furniture production team. The touch of the carpentry tools filled him with nostalgia. It was his first time to use them in five years.

The forty-odd years since the end of World War have been far from settled for Tsukasa Kikuchi. Upheavals in the workplace, bankruptcies, and other misfortunes pushed him from one job to another. In addition to the struggle to make an adequate living, he has never been free from worry about his health and the health of his family. Years of hard labor have aggravated

ed the pain in his back. His fellow atomic bomb survivors have died one after another around him, and the thought "perhaps I am next" has never given him a moment's peace of mind.

At the age of 64 he developed a serious illness in which water collected in his chest, and he suffered from a dangerously high fever for several weeks. He was told by the doctor to quit his job and enter the Atomic Bomb Hospital. This was a tremendous shock for Mitsue but she visited him daily and did everything in her power to speed up his recovery.

Through contact with the other patients in the hospital, Tsukasa realized that there are still many people suffering from the effects of the atomic bombing. He marveled at the fact that he had managed to stay healthy over the years. He spent eight months in the hospital and then another year recuperating at home. His health and vigor gradually returned, but he is still burdened with constant worry and apprehension about future illness.

Unable until now to communicate his thoughts in this way, Tsukasa makes an offering of flowers at the Peace Memorial Ceremony every year on August 9 and prays silently for the repose of the souls of his dead relatives and friends.

"The atomic bombs of 40 years ago had enough power to cause this incredible devastation. Modern technology has created weapons with 20 times, 30 times that much power. The tragedy and horror of the atomic bombings must never be repeated. It is my fervent unremitting prayer that the peaceful life we enjoy today continues forever."

## **Misunderstanding**

The record of Meiko Higashi

### **1. Encountering Meiko Higashi**

Meiko Higashi was born with a hearing deficiency. Among the five children in her family, both Meiko and her immediate younger brother Shoei were unable to hear.

The home of the Higashi family was completely destroyed by the atomic bomb,

and the subsequent part of Meiko's life has been a series of bitter hardships that defy imagination. For a long time, there was no assistance in the form of social welfare. It was only very recently, in fact, that Meiko learned of the existence of the Association of the Deaf and Dumb or the services provided by the sign language interpreters.

It was due to an unexpected occurrence that Meiko first came into contact with organizations for the deaf. A recent physical screening test for atomic bomb survivors, which is held annually by the City of Nagasaki, revealed certain abnormalities in Meiko's case. A detailed medical survey was deemed necessary. Unlike conventional examinations, this would involve various complicated blood tests and questioning~In order to assure correct communication, the Nagasaki branch of the Japanese Study Group of Sign Language Problems was asked to dispatch a member to help Meiko.

The medical survey revealed anemia due to iron shortage, thyroid gland abnormality and inflammation of the stomach. These disorders were probably effects of exposure to the atomic bomb explosion. During the intervals between tests, Meiko submitted to questions about her symptoms and the circumstances of her daily life. Using primitive gestures and her limited skill at sign language, she made it known that she had been in Motohara, only 1.5 kilometers from the hypocenter, at the time of the atomic bombing. This means that she is one of the very few survivors of close-range exposure to the explosion.

Until now, Meiko had never described her childhood or upbringing, let alone her experience of the atomic bombing. She had never been blessed with a proper education, nor met an interpreter who could help her communicate her memories and ideas. The screening test for atomic bomb survivors opened the door to communication between Meiko and a sign language interpreter, thereby shedding light for the first time on her turbulent life.



## 2. Happy Days of Childhood

Meiko was born on October 2, 1935, the eldest daughter in a family of two boys and three girls. The children lived happily with their parents and grandfather in a small house on the bank of the Urakami River.

Meiko's father was a skilled stonemason who supported his family by carving grave-stones and Buddhist statues.

As the state of World War II grew worse for Japan, Meiko's father was forced to suspend his work as a stonemason and join a government labor team. Nagasaki was designated as a potential air-raid target because of its many military industries, and so the destruction of clustered neighborhoods was commenced as a fire prevention measure. Meiko's father was assigned to a demolition team, and in January 1945 he was pinned under the beams of a collapsed building and died. With five children to raise, Meiko's mother was on the edge of despair but the support and encouragement of her neighbors helped her to recover from her loss. She started to work as a house-keeper for the Ide family who lived next door.

Meiko entered the Nagasaki Prefecture School for the Deaf and Dumb but at the time the teaching method consisted merely of writing words in the simple Japanese "katakana" syllabary and lip reading.

"The teachers moved their lips up and down but I couldn't understand what they were saying."

The lessons were probably too difficult for Meiko to keep up with. Even now it is all she can do to write her own name, and she can only read the simplest of words, like "pen" or "hat".

The increasingly critical situation in the war soon made it necessary to close down the school and convert it into an arms factory. In April 1945 it was moved to Shimabara, a small city in the southern part of Nagasaki Prefecture. Meiko was forced to withdraw because of the long journey necessary to attend classes, and she never had another opportunity to receive an education.

## 3. August 9, 1945. 11:02 a.m.

Dawn came at the end of another hot, humid night. Meiko's mother rose at five o'clock, as usual, and prepared breakfast for her children. It was already eight o'clock by the time they had eaten and the dishes had been washed and put away.

With three year-old Haruko strapped to her back, Mrs. Higashi went down to the Urakami River to do her washing. Takeo took Shoei, who was now seven years old, out to the front of the house to play. They were probably throwing paper airplanes around or spinning handmade tops on the pavement.

Meiko stayed in the house to look after her youngest sister Chiyoko who was still only nine months old. She played marbles by herself on the tatami-mat floor. Meiko remembers this as being about 10:30 a.m.

Suddenly a white light flashed and a ferocious wind hit the room. The next thing she knew, Meiko was lying with the heavy tatami mats piled up wildly on top of her. Completely bewildered, she looked upward and the scene that met her eyes was like nothing she had ever seen or imagined before.

"There was an orange-colored ball of fire surrounded by whirlpools of moving white smoke. The clouds soon became long and narrow and spread out like wings. Flashes of red light snorted out through cracks in the clouds. I was so frightened that my body shook uncontrollably."

Meiko looked in fright around her and saw that little Chiyoko had also been blown across the room by the blast and was now pinned under tatami mats and debris. She struggled desperately and managed to rescue the baby from the debris. Luckily, both Meiko and Chiyoko had escaped serious injury, but the room was strewn with broken wood and furniture and the house itself was leaning over to one side. Meiko felt a rush of dread for the safety of her mother, brothers and sister.

Takeo and Shoei, who had been playing outdoors, came into the ruined house. Shoei had suffered burns on one side from his waist down to his ankle. This burn later

turned into an ugly keloid scar that still disfigures his body.

Just as the four children were about to leave the house together, they noticed their mother approaching. Joy at seeing her alive turned to shock when she came closer. She had suffered terrible burns and there was not as much as a trace left of her gentle features. Her clothing was torn to shreds, her hair was frizzled and standing on end, and the skin on her chest was burned and dripping down like melted wax.

Mrs. Higashi beckoned frantically to her children, apparently gesturing for them to flee with her to the nearby mountainside. She used only gestures, not for the sake of the two deaf children, but because she was so severely injured that she could not make a sound.

Said Yoshiko Araki, who met Mrs. Higashi right after the bombing: "There were no houses left standing, only clouds of smoke and dust everywhere. I started to run and met Mrs. Higashi on the path between two rice paddies. I cried out 'Mrs. Higashi! Mrs. Higashi!' but she just stood there without saying anything. Her face was muddy-grey in color. She had come all the way to my house and seen my injuries but just stood blankly without saying a word to comfort me."

However, Mrs. Araki realized later that Mrs. Higashi had been in no condition to speak. "When I met her on the narrow path she wouldn't answer no matter how many times I called and I wondered why .... She had been outdoors and had burns all over her body. She was standing dazed and in shock. She was so badly injured that she couldn't even say a word."

Mrs. Higashi hurried with her children toward the nearby mountainside, driven only by a profound maternal instinct. Meiko carried the baby, and Mrs. Higashi carried three year-old Haruko while pulling Shoei along by the hand. The eldest son, Takeo ran ahead of the others in the direction of the air-raid shelter.

#### **4. Three Days in the Air-Raid Shelter**

Meiko's mother laid down on a straw

mat in the shelter. Smoke wafted in through cracks in the door. The fires outside spread to a nearby bamboo grove and the bursts of the hollow trees echoed inside the tiny space.

The midsummer heat and the lack of any ventilation combined to make the shelter seem like a steam oven. Flies and mosquitoes were flying around incessantly and soon maggots started to appear in Mrs. Higashi's burned flesh. There was no medicine and of course no doctors nearby. There was nothing at all that they could do for their mother.

Shoei was also lying face down without moving because of his burns, and the baby, unable to drink her mother's milk, was gradually losing strength. At dawn the next day, pieces of apple were distributed by a rescue team, and these helped to relieve their hunger a little. Later, a small amount of rice and pickled radishes were brought around, but the indescribable stench wafting on the air like poison gas was so sickening that no one could eat. Meiko suffered terrible headaches because of this smell during the three long days in the shelter.

She also suffered from severe diarrhea that lasted for several days, and now remembers going out into the smoldering ruins to relieve herself. At that time, there was no knowledge whatsoever about radiation and the damage it causes. The diarrhea prevalent in Nagasaki after the atomic bombing was diagnosed as midsummer food poisoning or dysentery.

The truth, however, was different. Even in the shade of a building, people exposed to the explosion 1.5 kilometers from the hypocenter received a considerable dose of radiation. It is said that young cells are particularly vulnerable to the scourge of radiation. The baby Chiyoko had been exposed to the explosion under the same circumstances as the others, but her condition was deteriorating swiftly.

#### **5. Moving to Azekari**

Two relatives of the Higashi family, who lived in a town called Azekari on the outskirts of Nagasaki and had heard about the

destruction caused by the "new type" bomb, came into the city pulling a wheel cart. They found Mrs. Higashi and her children and convinced them to leave the shelter and go to their home in Azekari. Mrs. Higashi, Shoei and Haruko were placed on the cart, while Meiko carried Chiyoko and Takeo pushed the cart from behind. It is 11 kilometers as the crow flies from Motohara to Azekari, but the road rises and falls as it passes over mountains and winds through valleys. It is impossible to imagine Meiko's ordeal trudging along the dusty path under the blazing sun and carrying her baby sister.

Today Meiko remembers almost nothing about the gruesome scenes in the hypocenter area that passed before her eyes—it had been all she could do to stay on her feet and continue walking.

Even in Azekari there was a shortage of food and supplies. Medicine was completely unavailable. The only thing they could do for Mrs. Higashi, who was dying before their eyes, was to spread camellia oil on her burns. Little Haruko, who for several days had been unable to take anything but water, died on September 4 in a delirium of pain and high fever.

The next day, as if following Haruko on her journey, Mrs. Higashi passed away....

## 6. Separation of Brothers and Sisters

After the death of Mrs. Higashi, the relatives discussed the future of the four remaining children. The austere economic situation at the time made it impossible for one family to adopt all the children, so they were divided among three different relatives. The eldest son Takeo went to the Saitsu family in Tategami,

Meiko and little Chiyoko stayed with the Egawa family in Azekari, and Shoei was taken by the Minami's who also lived in Azekari.

Chiyoko soon became seriously ill, and despite Meiko's desperate efforts to take care of her, she died on September 25. It was the end of a little life of less than one year.

The mother of the Egawa family where



Meiko had settled was ill and unable to work. Immediately after her arrival Meiko was forced to help with chores around the house. Not only that, she had to spend the rest of her time working in the potato fields, feeding the cows and doing other tasks outdoors. Her hands became as rough as leather and her fingernails broke off.

When it came time to harvest the potatoes, she had to pile them high in baskets and carry them to the house on a pole over her shoulder. It was back-breaking labor for a ten year-old child. Even today, Meiko has callous like scars on her shoulders.

However, Meiko's greatest hardship of all was the cruel treatment she received from the other children in her neighborhood. When she went outdoors she was ridiculed and beaten for the simple reason that she was deaf. Everyday she would hide in the shadows of the house until the bullies had disappeared from sight. When questioned about those experiences, Meiko hit her own cheeks as hard as she could in an effort to relate the facts to the sign language interpreter. She struck herself with such force that her cheeks turned bright red and the interpreter reached out instinctively to stop her hands. Being bullied is hell for a child who has no one to turn to for help.

## 7. Returning to the House in Motohara

The recording of Meiko Higashi's atomic bomb and postwar experiences took place during ten conversation sessions. It was a complicated task that required the cooperation of several people, including a questioner, a sign language interpreter, a person to interpret Meiko's other gestures and another person to write down the replies.

When they visited her in her solitary abode she welcomed everyone warmly. At the date and time set earlier, the group knocked at the door of the Higashi home half way up Nagasaki's Mt. Inasa, and Meiko opened it with a happy smile. She had prepared a pot of sweet bean soup which she served to her guests eagerly along with homemade pickles, and for a long time she avoided conversation about her experiences.

This is not strange, considering that during the long years after the war she had rarely been able to communicate with anyone in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. When given a pen and asked to write her name, she scribbled the three simple letters that denote the sounds "Me-i-ko", but she was either unable or reluctant to write her surname. Separated from her brothers and sisters and treated only as a laborer in her foster home, Meiko had never needed anything but a first name. During the more than four decades since the end of World Wars II, she had been robbed of almost every opportunity to call herself, or be called, "Meiko Higashi."

In order to confirm the details of her story, the interpreters asked Meiko to join the group on a tour around the locations in question. It was a rainy day in April when the group set out. The green shades of spring in the Urakami area were rendered all the more brilliant by the softly falling rain. On both sides of the road stretching down from Motohara to the Urakami River, the cherry trees had already shed their blossoms and hidden their branches in new foliage. Nothing in this peaceful spring scenery even hinted at the cataclysm that occurred here 41 years earlier.

Meiko suggested that a visit be paid to the home of the Ide family. When the group arrived in front of the house, Meiko knocked at the door eagerly, then threw it open and called out in a loud voice : "O-ba-a-chan Me-i-ko!" (The Japanese word "obachan" means "grandma"). The other members of the group could not believe their ears. Meiko's vocal sounds very rarely formed comprehensible words, but her miniscule vocabulary included this intimate term "grandma". For Meiko, the elderly Mrs. Ide is one of the very few living people with whom she shared her happy early childhood and also the hardships and misery of the atomic bombing. Meiko gave Mrs. Ide the small present she had brought along. Although wrapped randomly in a sheet of newspaper, it was a vivid expression of her love for the old lady.

Mrs. Ide led Meiko and her companions to a table in front of the family Buddhist altar in the living room. Meiko bowed deeply and her cheek glistened with a stream off tears. What was it that produced these tears? Perhaps she recalled happy days spent with her dead mother, father and sisters. Perhaps she thought of their deaths one after another in the ruins after the atomic bombing. The other members of the group had a keen insight into the trauma suffered by Meiko at the time of the atomic bombing.

Meiko led the way to the old air-raid shelter behind the Ide house. The rough dugout was still there. It had a tiny entrance barely large enough for a person to pass through. For the first chaotic three days after the bombing, the Higashi family laid together in solitude and fear in this tiny space.

One person who worried about the fate of this unfortunate family was their neighbor Yoshiko Araki. In her book, "My Experience of the Nagasaki Atomic Bombing," she writes : "Mrs. Higashi was so severely injured she could no longer speak.

"Her husband had died in an accident during the war and now she was alone with five young children .... Whatever could have happened to those children ?"

Their fate after the war was more miserable than Mrs. Araki ever imagined. Standing in front of the shelter, Meiko was silent and uncommunicative.

## **8. The Chaotic Postwar Period (Takeo's testimony)**

After recovering from pleurisy, Takeo made up his mind to become independent and secure a steady income of his own. He also hoped to bring his brother and sister together under one roof again. With this goal in his heart, he started out from zero on the road to independence. After turning 15 he joined the crew of a ship, thinking that this was the quickest way to earn a substantial sum of money.

He heard rumors about the hardships that Meiko and Shoei were suffering. He wanted to rescue them as soon as possible and start some sort of business where they could work together. If he could not achieve this, Takeo felt his life would be pointless and he would never have any peace of mind.

For the sake of the future he quit his job on the ship and found a job at a construction company where he could learn new skills. His efforts gradually began to bear fruit. At the age of 22 Takeo had a grave-stone erected for the deceased members of his family. Now his loving mother and father and his little sisters would finally be able to rest in peace. Later, Takeo married and in 1967 built a house for his family.

In 1971 he established the "Higashi Construction Company" with a large workshop near his house. Beside the workshop he built accommodations for Meiko and Shoei. Finally, 26 years after the death of his mother, Takeo's longing for a reunion with his brother and sister was about to be realized. He went to Azekari to visit his relatives and ask them to allow Meiko and Shoei to move to Nagasaki. Contrary to his expectations, however, he received a cold reception at the home of the Egawa family. Meiko had singlehandedly taken over the farm chores for her aunt, who was ill and unable to work, and the Egawa family did not want to lose her.

Takeo explained the reasons for his request and appealed ardently for the release of his sister. To the end the Egawa family refused to agree, but he managed to bring Meiko back to Nagasaki. In this way, Meiko and Shoei took up new duties and a new life at Takeo's company. The driving force behind the foundation of the company was Takeo's desire to secure a place where his brother and sister could work without constraint or unfair treatment. Nevertheless, there are unsympathetic people in the world. Workers from other companies often criticize Takeo saying, "Why do you employ handicapped people like this?" But he ignores this prejudice and continues to ensure that Meiko and Shoei have a proper place to work and that they have a sound financial basis for the future.

During her years with the Egawa family in Azekari, Meiko had never had any contact with money. At her brother's company she received wages for the first time in her life, and so her joy at this experience was understandably great. In one frenzied shopping spree she spent all of her first month's salary. She wanted to enjoy the luxury of her own money—to throw off her old clothes and put on a pretty dress that she chose herself. Before she knew it not a single yen remained.

Takeo became concerned when he saw this rash behavior on the part of his sister, who was not accustomed to having money, and he decided to keep back a portion of her salary for savings.

Meiko's daily wage is 5,000 yen. She works about 17 days a month and so is entitled to a salary of about 85,000 yen. In addition she receives an atomic bomb allowance and welfare annuity for the handicapped, both of which Takeo deposits into her bank account.

This is a cause of discontent for Meiko. She thinks that Takeo is cunning and unfair in not giving her all the money she deserves, and, unaware of the pains he took to finally bring her back from the Ogawa family, she thinks he is living an easy life at others' expense.

For example, Takeo sits at a desk in the

office and does paperwork while Meiko and Shoei labor outdoors, carrying rocks and digging holes until their backs are sore. To Meiko, Takeo seems to be enjoying an easy job while she toils and sweats.

On one occasion, in a burst of anger at her unreasonableness, Takeo slapped Meiko. Shoei stepped in to stop the quarrel, but Meiko has been dejected ever since. She continues to begrudge the fact that she is not allowed to handle her own financial affairs.

Seeing Meiko's attitude but frustratingly unable to communicate with her, Takeo resigned himself to the situation. During the conversations to collect information for this book, however, he was astonished by what he heard from the sign language interpreters. "Did Meiko really say that? Is it possible to express such subtle feelings by sign language?" For the first time in his life Takeo realized the capacities of this silent form of communication.

Surprised and confused, Takeo stated frankly that this was the first time in 41 years that he gained a clear insight into Meiko's thoughts and feelings. With the help of the interpreter, Meiko gradually began to open up and express her wishes to Takeo. She told him that she wanted to take care of her annuity certificates and bank book herself. Little by little, the complicated web of discord between brother and sister is unraveling.

However, one major misunderstanding remains unsolved. This is Meiko's assumption that, in the chaos after the atomic

bombing, Takeo left his mother and siblings behind and fled alone from the ruins. In order to determine the truth, the sign language interpreter asked Takeo what had really happened.

"My mother was in no condition to lead her children away from danger," he replied. "I was the only one capable of leading the way. In order to find a place of refuge, I had no choice but to run ahead. There was no time to try to explain this to Meiko or Shoei. My only thought was to get everyone to safety as quickly as possible. I can't believe that Meiko thinks I was forgetting everyone else and trying to save myself ..."

It is a tragic misunderstanding. Takeo's goodwill and heroic efforts were twisted in the confusion after the atomic bombing and have never been set straight.

The interpreters could now understand the reality of the situation, but they did not attempt to explain it to Meiko. Even if they did, this is not the kind of problem that can be solved immediately. There is a limit to the powers of an interpreter.

Takeo's miserable life with his foster parents .... Meiko's decades of hardship and loneliness .... The long separation between brother and sister still hides many things about which Takeo and Meiko are completely unaware.

Having mutually acknowledged the value of sign language, it is their task now to make patient efforts to fill in the huge gap of misinformation.