

Nobuharu Takahira

I would still prefer not to remember. . .



Born in December 1928, Nobuharu Takahira was exposed to the atomic bombing at the Mitsubishi Electric factory near Nagasaki Port, 3 kilometers from the hypocenter in Nagasaki. He was 16. His health deteriorated after exposure, and his life has been filled with great anxiety. He was assigned to Mitsubishi Electric for “labor service” and worked there until he retired.

Nobuharu was a second-year student at Nita Higher Elementary School, and was going to graduate in four months. His job was to connect rotating parts to fixed parts in ship motors. This was his official “labor service.”

Anxiety was the deeper pain

It was a perfectly clear day. Nobuharu heard the buzzing B-29 bombers and looked toward the sky from a factory window, but he didn’t see anything.

While looking out the window, I noticed the clock over the entrance to the factory and was just looking to see what time it was. In that instant a pure white flash came in horizontally through the window. As soon as I turned my face toward the flash, I heard a tremendous booom!

I pressed my ears with my thumbs and my eyes with my index and middle fingers and threw myself to the ground. We had been drilled

to do this to protect our eyes and ears. As we worked, a civilian employee would suddenly shout, “Down!!” and we would have to get into that posture as quickly as possible. Because of this training, I was able to take quick action.

Just as I got into the posture, window glass from the high factory ceiling came crashing down with a roar. I wore a combat cap and work uniform, so my head and body were protected. Still, a sharp glass fragment struck the back of my right ear. I felt warm blood flowing onto my face. What if the glass fragment had been slightly to the left? It might have struck my carotid artery. I shudder to think of it. I still have the scar from that cut.

When Nobuharu raised his head, he saw the roof had been totally blown off by the blast. The factory building had been reduced to an iron frame. He was looking outside as dust and dirt from the factory billowed high into the sky.

The other side of the factory was a wooden building for female workers. A volunteer corps from Kumamoto Girls School had come for training in making searchlights. Because their building was wooden, many workers were killed.

I saw my coworkers at the factory running toward the shelter behind the factory. We called it a shelter, but it was just a hole scooped out of the rocky slope of the hillside. It had been used as a test site for large turbine generators. Over 1,200 factory workers rushed there all at once.

Many who had been working in the factory were bleeding, like me, due to injuries from glass shards or other objects hurled by the blast. Those who had been working outside were in worse condition. Their hair was scorched and frizzy, their skin hideously burnt, and their clothes in tatters. Even though it was midsummer, most people in the shelter were shivering and saying, “I’m cold.”

The sights I saw when I left the factory to go home were too horrible to believe. Among the people rushing to escape faster than others was a person tottering unsteadily, looking exactly like a terribly burnt ghost. A woman clung tightly to her dead baby, yelling in delirium. People like these were everywhere. I finally reached Inasa Bridge.

Probably because it was almost noon and so many households had been preparing lunch, fires quickly broke out here and there, spreading rapidly. The entire Urakami area was soon a sea of fire. Wooden homes were the first to go. Concrete buildings were blazing by evening.

I saw a streetcar with its whole top blown off. Its passengers lay dead, piled on top of one another on the streetcar floor. Streetcar rails were raised and twisted like roller coaster rails. Terribly burnt cows and horses lay toppled in the road.

I wanted to get home, but I thought it might be dangerous to cross Inasa Bridge. I decided to cross the river by municipal ferry. I turned around and headed for a pier, thinking I could get a ride to Ohato Wharf.

At the pier, they said they couldn't launch the boat because the captain had run away. While we were speaking, an enemy plane appeared and fired its machine gun fiercely in our direction. We all ran this way and that to escape from this unexpected strafing. Some hid under the pier. Others threw themselves on the floor. There's no way to miss a white summer shirt, but nobody was shot. I still wonder why.

The enemy plane left, but the ferry captain never came back. I was irritated, but when I think about it now, what followed was like a cartoon.

At that time, besides the municipal ferry, which was like a bus service, quite a few people had bought and used *tenmasen* as their

means of transport. A *tenmasen* was a boat rowed with a single oar in the back, like a sampan or gondola. Creak. . . Creak. . . Given the tension around us at that moment, the *tenmasen* appeared utterly foolish, but people worried about what had happened in Nagasaki were arriving on one.

When the passengers got out, those of us on the pier started fighting to get on board. The boat soon filled up with five or six people, but there was no one to row it. One of us took the oar and started rowing based on his imagination of how to row a *tenmasen*.

When we got to the middle of the river, the same enemy plane came back. Now we were in a panic. The *tenmasen* was just slightly bigger than a rowboat, and there was no place to hide.

“Hurry up! What are you doing, idiot?”

“Turn right!”

Everyone was complaining and blaming the rower, but he was a beginner and was in a complete panic. He seemed to hit his wrist on something. His watchband broke and the watch dropped into the water. He tried to grab the sinking watch. Thrusting himself forward, he fell into the water himself. We pulled him out of the water, while watching the enemy plane closely. As we did so, the oar slipped off the oarlock. We were left with no choice but to float helplessly wherever the river would take us.

The enemy plane flew high into the sky. It seemed to turn off its engine. It grew quiet, then flew back down in a fast dive. It came back at a height where they could clearly see our boat. The machine gun began firing as the plane buzzed the surface of the water, then climbed high again.

We were under attack, so naturally, screaming and chaos filled the boat. We all wondered why a boat stopped in the middle of a harbor with no oar should be the target of an enemy plane. Then we discovered that the oar was attached to the boat by a string, so we used the string to pull the oar back.

When I talk about it now, it's ridiculous, even funny, but there, on the border between life and death, we were completely out of our minds. I shrank myself as small as possible and concentrated on praying for safe passage to Ohato.

I will never forget the sound of that machine gun firing bullets into the water with a *pyun-pyun* sound. Perhaps the gunner was upset, or a beginner, but miraculously, no one was shot. We arrived safely in Ohato. From there, I took a long detour home to Kamikoshima.

On the way home I saw the area behind Ohato (now the Nagasaki Prefectural Government Building). The entire area was a sea of fire. The fire burned continuously for three days and three nights. Then, heavy rain fell for a few days. In Kamikoshima we had normal heavy rain, but I heard some places had black rain.

When I got home, I found all the window glass shattered, but other than that, the house was undamaged. My mother had died a few years earlier, and my younger brother also had died from tuberculosis when he was small. Therefore, I lived with my father, who worked for a printing company.

I arrived home in the evening. My father, who was saved by a shelter, came home later that night. He was overjoyed to see me, saying, "I heard the city was totally destroyed by a new type of bomb. I was sure you were dead."

The Mitsubishi Electric factory was destroyed; no operations were possible. It remained closed for more than two years. When it reopened, Nobuharu returned to work and stayed until retirement.

I got married in 1953. My company often held parties in a certain *champon* restaurant. (*Champon* is a Nagasaki specialty, like ramen noodles.) In that restaurant a certain young woman lived and worked. The proprietress of the restaurant knew my uncle, and the two of them would talk about me marrying her.

My future wife's mother said, "Even if he's poor, I want your husband to be healthy." I looked a bit pale, so they made me submit a certificate of health. My mother-in-law knew I was a *hibakusha*. According to my wife, when our first son was born, her mother came into the hospital and surreptitiously counted our son's fingers and toes. Sure enough, she had been worried.

I was inside the factory and didn't breathe the "radioactive gas." I was convinced there was no reason for me to be affected. As far as I was concerned, the only aftereffect of the atomic bombing was the scar behind my ear where I had been cut by a glass fragment. However, a medical checkup I had when the factory reopened found that I had a stomach ulcer. Around that time, my health deteriorated. I frequently had diarrhea. I carried with me a medicine for intestinal disorders and took it often. My thyroid gland was weak, and whenever I got sick, my throat would swell up.

I do not want to talk much about my anxiety. It is something you simply cannot understand if you were not exposed. It's so cruel. When I get even slightly sick, I get a stinging pain near my stomach. I feel fear, wondering if I've finally come down with some terrible disease. More than burns and injuries, I think the primary suffering of survivors is our anxiety, the lack of normal peace of mind. I have lived with this anxiety for 70 years.

Even my wife asked me why I haven't talked about my exposure to the atomic bombing through all these years. The fact is, I didn't want to remember. But soon after my daughter entered high school, she said her class had to write essays to pass on the atomic bombing, and asked me to tell my story. I turned her down at first, but in the end, I decided to tell her.

To tell the truth, I would still prefer not to remember.