

NEVER SILENT

A HIROSHIMA SURVIVOR'S STORY



Written by Setsuko Thurlow and Kathy Lowinger
Illustrated by Michelle Theodore

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**“Don’t give up!
Crawl toward
the light!”**

The man’s voice was urgent. He grabbed my shoulder as I struggled through the rubble that covered me. The wooden building where thirty of us had been working was in flames.





A Message from Setsuko

At 8:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. It unleashed horrific destruction. Most of the men had gone off to war. That awful day, seventy thousand women, children, and old people were incinerated, carbonized, and vaporized. By the end of 1945, another seventy thousand had perished. Among them were members of my own family and 351 of my schoolmates. Each had a life, a future, people who loved them—all erased in an instant. The horror of that day, and of the days, months, and years of suffering that followed, is almost impossible to describe. Over the years, many thousands more would die, often in mysterious ways that we would come to learn were the effects of radiation. To this day, radiation is still killing survivors. We don't know what the genetic effect will be on our children and grandchildren.

I am telling you this story not because I want your pity. I am writing to encourage you to act.

—From notes for Setsuko Thurlow's speech in Oslo in 2017, when the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize





The Before Time

Daughter of a Samurai

I was born Setsuko Nakamura in Kojijn-machi, an eastern part of Hiroshima, on January 3, 1932, into a samurai family.

Though the privileges that had once come with being a samurai were gone by this time, there was still honor. Our house had a marker outside so that people would know that a samurai family lived there.

I was proud of being from a samurai family, and my mother made sure I knew that with the privilege came responsibility to society. She was a devout Buddhist. Buddhists believe that though there is suffering in human life, enlightenment can be achieved through spiritual and physical labor and good behavior. I grew up watching my mother carry out many acts of worship and charity.



Setsuko at thirteen



Two samurai pose with their swords in 1877.

The Samurai

The samurai were an elite class of fearless warriors in Japan from the twelfth to the nineteenth century. Although emperors were the official rulers, the real power lay with the samurai. As well as being superb fighters, they were often artists. By the time Setsuko was born, samurai warriors no longer existed. The emperor Meiji had abolished the samurai system to change Japan into a more modern industrialized nation-state. In 1871, the samurai class was officially dissolved and samurai land was confiscated. Wearing a sword had been a visible privilege given only to samurai. Now it was forbidden.

Everything Changes

My six brothers and sisters were much older than I was.

The gardener who tended our lovely garden became my friend, teaching me about the trees and flowers. My father was the head of the family—the clan—so relatives were always coming and going. They all doted on me, the precocious baby of the family.

Reading was my favorite thing. I read the newspapers and followed current events—there was always someone willing to answer my stream of questions.

School was easy for me. I was the only girl to get honors for each of the first six years of elementary school. From junior high on, I went to a private Christian girls' school, Hiroshima Jogakuin, noted for teaching English and music. If you kept up your marks, you could learn to play the piano. I longed for that.

The war changed everything.



Setsuko, second from left, at age fourteen, with her parents (mother to her right, father to her left), sister (standing behind her), sister-in-law, and niece (to her father's left)







War Comes to Japan

I can say that my childhood ended on December 8, 1941. That day, the radio announcer declared that Japan was at war with the United States and the Allied forces.

The radio announcers reminded us of our commitment to the emperor. Every day, year after year, we listened to the radio for news about the war. First would come stirring music. Then we would get reports of the battles we had won.

I was in eighth grade. Along with about thirty girls from my school, I was given special training to help decode messages from the front lines. It was complicated work. You had to add and subtract quickly and check the code books fast without making any mistakes. It shows how desperate Japan was that schoolgirls were put in charge of such important work. What we didn't know was that the Americans had broken the codes.

As summer wore on, everyone was tense. Other cities had been bombed. Why not Hiroshima?

A Visit to Hiroshima

In the heart of Hiroshima—a modern city of just over a million people on Japan's Honshu island—lies a serene park with walking paths, green lawns, and leafy trees. It was created in 1949 as a way to remember the many lives lost in the world's first nuclear attack. At one end is the Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome)—the only structure left standing on the site where the bomb was dropped. It is a skeleton now,

but it was once the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, a European-style building with the only domed roof in the city. A trading company was housed here, as well as a craft school. It was also a place for performances by tap dancers and comedians. For children, the land around the building was a playground, perfect for hide-and-seek and tag. Today, the ruins are as they were on August 6, 1945.



Top: Pre-attack view of Hiroshima on April 13, 1945

Bottom: Post-attack view of Hiroshima on August 11, 1945



Top left: The remains of the Genbaku Dome (Atomic Bomb Dome) in Peace Memorial Park

Top right: A prewar photograph of Hiroshima's shopping district near the center of town

Bottom: Streetcars on Hiroshima streets on the morning of August 6, 1945

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park lies over what was the neighborhood of Nakajima—an important part of Hiroshima and, hence, a natural target for the bomb. The busy streets around the Industrial Promotion Hall were once tightly lined with wooden shops and houses. You could buy kimonos, footwear, makeup, seaweed, eels,

and oysters there. For lunch you might have a penny pancake bought on the street. You ate it fast because lunchtime was for marbles or menko cards. (One player puts a menko card on the ground, and the opponent tries to flip it by the way they throw down their card. Success meant keeping both cards.)



Hiroshima Castle was originally built in the 1590s but was largely destroyed by the bombing. It was rebuilt in 1958 and now houses a museum of Hiroshima's history before World War II.

There were two movie theaters in Nakajima, one that played American movies such as *King Kong*, and one that played Japanese movies, including lots of action films featuring samurai heroes. When there was no sound for the Japanese movies, storytellers would fill in, narrating the tale while the movie played.

If you were really lucky, your parents might take you to one of the local oyster boat restaurants. Or, better yet, to Nakajima's only Western-style restaurant, Café Brazil, where you could order coffee and rice omelets and curry.

And there was always the river. From spring to autumn, the doors of shops and houses were opened to catch the breezes coming off the water. In summer, you would find time for swimming or fishing for shrimp and eels. After the stores closed for the night, people would gather at the community bath, a large bathing pool. It was always busy, filled with patrons catching up on the news of the day until it closed at midnight.



Emperor Hirohito, 1901–1989

The Emperor

Shinto is a Japanese religion that incorporates the worship of ancestors, nature, and spirits. According to tradition, the position of emperor was created in the seventh century BCE, but it was probably later, during the fifth or sixth century. Emperors came to be known as Tenno, or “heavenly sovereign,” based on the belief that they were descendants of Shinto Kami (spirits) and so were considered the sons of heaven. Today, emperors are viewed as human but are still very important in Japan. Although the emperor's political power is now limited, he is defined by the Constitution of Japan as being the symbol of the state and the unity of the country. (Although women were allowed to hold the role of emperor in the past, they are not currently permitted to do so.)



Left: Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) was the founder and first shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate of Japan. **Center:** Emperor Meiji around the 1890s **Right:** Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) was regarded as the second “Great Unifier” of Japan.

Hiroshima had been founded as a castle town on the Ota River delta in 1589. Even before the war, life here and across Japan was changing. For hundreds of years, the country had been ruled by a shogun (a military general), feudal lords called *daimyos*, and samurai, members of a warrior class who gave the shogun power over the emperor. The last shogunate ended in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration, when the emperor Meiji was crowned. After that, Hiroshima grew fast. Soon it was the tenth-largest city in Japan and known for its progressive ways, especially in matters of education and teacher training. Japan was no longer a feudal society. It was becoming one of the most powerful nations in the modern world.

“After the Meiji Restoration, most of the country’s provinces were replaced with prefectures, led by a governor who answered to the central government. When the first governor traveled to Hiroshima by boat around 1872, he and his family had to be carried to dry land. That left him determined to build a decent harbor for the city, but such a project cost a lot of money. My grandfather played an important role in raising the money for a harbor. Its construction eventually had an impact not anticipated at the time. In 1884, nobody was thinking of the harbor for military use—it was built for trade. But by the time of World War II, almost all personnel shipped to the battles in the Pacific left from Hiroshima. Our relatives would bring cold food and spread out a blanket in the park to see my cousins off to war. At first it was exciting, but my father had lived in California and knew the power of the United States. He was worried.”

—Setsuko

1944 US forces come close enough to Japan to start bombing large cities.

1945 The atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Emperor Hirohito surrenders and gives up his divine status. Japan is placed under US and British Commonwealth forces occupation.

1947 Japan renounces war, pledging not to maintain armed forces. The emperor is given ceremonial status.

1951 Japan signs a peace treaty with the United States and forty-seven other nations.

1952 The US military occupation of Japan ends when the treaty comes into effect.



A group of Tachikawa Ki-36 reconnaissance aircraft of the Imperial Japanese Army fly near Mount Fuji in the early 1940s.

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