

Kokoro no Kizu (Scars of the Heart) The Story of Michiko Yamaoka¹

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Sometime around 8:00a.m. August 6, 1945, fifteen year old Michiko Yamaoka said "see you later" to her mother and headed for the door. As she was about to leave her mother called out to her, "watch out, the B-29s might come back again."² Ms. Yamaoka assured her mother that she was just paranoid and started her journey to work without giving it much thought.³ Several minutes after leaving her house she noticed a group of students pulling down houses at a point about eight hundred meters away from the hypocenter (ground zero) to form a fire break. It was at that moment she heard the faint sound of planes passing over Hiroshima. "The planes were tricky. Sometimes they only pretended to leave. I could still hear the very faint sound of planes."⁴ Her life would be changed forever within the next few seconds. Looking up into the clear summer sky she remembered her mother's worries. Just as she was about to shield her eyes from the bright sun she witnessed a "beautiful blue-yellow flash" and fell unconscious.

She regained consciousness in a sea of darkness and heard the voices of others calling out for help. She soon heard her mother's voice and began to call out to her. The fire could be heard cracking all around her as her mother eventually found her and dug her out of the burning debris just in the nick of time. Thanks to her mother, Ms. Yamaoka miraculously escaped death twice within in a matter of several minutes. Only after being reunited with her mother did she realize the macabre scene around her. The image of skin hanging loosely and peeling off both her and her mother's arms was burnt into her memory forever. Her mother gestured for her to leave and so she headed for Hiyajima (an area that was not affected much by the initial blast).⁵ As she made her way through the "hell on earth" she heard a voice call out to her, "Michiko, is that you?" It was her friend from school, Keko. Michiko was frightened by her friend's appearance but was happy to have her company. They eventually came to a river filled with countless bodies. Keko insisted on jumping into the river and was never seen again. Fortunately, Ms. Yamaoka did not follow her friend and thus, escaped death a third time.

Ms. Yamaoka eventually made it to Hiyajima, which was also a nightmare. Soldiers came to help and dispose of dead bodies but regrettably, had no medication to give to the incalculable amount of victims. She still clearly recalls the horrors that surrounded her. "The worst part," she declares, "was that if you stopped yelling, if you stopped screaming, the soldiers considered you dead, and threw you on top of the pile of corpses."⁶ She, like many others, could do nothing but wait. Just when she was about to lose all hope, her mother found her. Ms. Yamaoka was so badly injured that her own mother could only identify her from the sound of her voice.

Ms. Yamaoka would never completely heal from her wounds. Directly after the blast, she had burns throughout much of her body. Also, her fingers were melted

together and she gradually lost her hair. About ten years after the end of the war, she was invited to the United States by an independent organization, *Friends*, in order to receive treatment that was not available in Japan at the time.⁷ She would stay in New York for a year and a half, spending most of her time in a hospital where she underwent twenty-seven operations. Even though the operations greatly improved her appearance, she later would suffer from cancer and numerous other problems. The largest scar, she says, is "the scars of her heart"⁸

Ms. Yamaoka's testimony is a chilling reminder of the death and destruction humans are capable of. The now seventy-five year old *hibakusha*⁹ has long since dedicated her life to peace education and is still traveling to share her story and speak out against war everywhere. "Nuclear weapons," she asserts, "are such an inhumane way to kill people. I don't want anyone to have to go through what I did." Remarkably, she still has faith in humanity and is certain that peace is possible. She asserts, "Never believe that we are powerless. Peace will come through the accumulation of individual efforts. My heart's deepest desire is the abolition of nuclear weapons and genuine peace on Earth."¹⁰ Hopefully everyone who hears her story will do their part to ensure that Ms. Yamaoka's vision becomes a reality, for it is the only way to fully heal the scars of her heart.

End Notes

¹ Ms. Yamaoka's lecture at the Hiroshima Peace Museum was the main basis for this work. A few online sources, however, were used in order to create a more complete narrative.

² Michiko Yamaoka, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, Hiroshima, Japan, October, 2004.

³ In order to support the war effort, Ms. Yamaoka, like many young women at the time, was encouraged to find employment prior to finishing school. She worked as a switchboard operator.

⁴ "Hiroshima: Survivors," *Hiroshima International School*, <http://www.hiroshima-is.ac.jp/Hiroshima/survivors.htm#Michiko%20Yamaoka>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Michiko Yamaoka," *IDEA Center for the Voices of Humanity*, 26, June 2003, <http://www.idealeprosydignity.org/VoicesOfHumanity/Awards.htm>

⁸ Michiko Yamaoka

⁹ Atomic bomb survivor

¹⁰ "Michiko Yamaoka," *IDEA Center for the Voices of Humanity*.