



## Book Review

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### Nagasaki Life After Nuclear War

Susan Southard

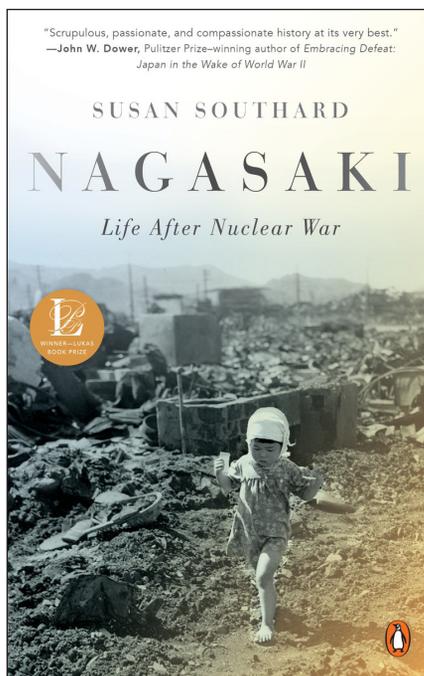
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Too many years have passed since atomic and nuclear explosions were witnessed. Too many years have wiped clean the memory of how destructive these weapons are. To educate our future nonproliferation professionals — to recreate the suffering that must be felt to prevent future nuclear cataclysms, the words that fill *Nagasaki – Life after Nuclear War* must be read. An accounting such as this where human suffering is emphasized rather than infrastructure damage or numbers tallying urban destruction or nameless fatalities, is absolutely needed for every generation to read.

Susan Southard has put together an accounting of human misery so tragic that one may have to “prepare” before opening these covers. No matter what your profession in the realm of nuclear materials management; no matter if you are a scientist, engineer, or policy-maker, this accounting ought to make you redouble your professional efforts. This book will make you think deeply about the creation of nuclear weapons and what was done with that creation. The words it contains should both frighten and inspire you. The tragic stories it tells will make you shudder in horror — they are intended to. They may make you



flinch at the human anguish one bomb can cause — they are meant to. They should give you pause and make you think how can you prevent this from ever happening again. If such is the case, Southard has succeeded.

The book follows the stories of five teenage *hibakusha* (Nagasaki atomic bomb survivors) as they struggle to reunite with their families and recover from their horrific injuries. The stories continue to the present day as again, they battle with the effort to prevent another nuclear holocaust through the public recounting of their experiences.

Southard is no mere storyteller. There is considerable research here. Hours of interviews with the *hibakusha* is supplemented with years of traditional library research, discussions with doctors and scientists and other post-nu-

clear survivors — much of this acquired during multiple trips to Japan. The notes section of this book exceeds forty-five pages.

The stories of the *hibakusha* are told in parallel so that chronologically, the reader follows all five along in time. Interwoven into their stories are the struggles of others who encountered the *hibakusha*, most notably the doctors who tried to treat them. Others, like their family members, coworkers, and friends are also included whenever information was available. The results are five stories of survival: five deeply personal, circumstance-driven descriptions of the horrific reality of post nuclear Nagasaki. Southard’s writing is clear, descriptive, and evocative. She holds a master of fine arts degree in creative writing and is conversant in Japanese, having lived there as an international scholarship student. Her skill at crafting the historically accurate stories of these remarkable individuals will be evident from the very first chapter.

These heart-wrenching tales of immeasurable misery are, of course, the main thrust of the book. They teach us that it is possible to overcome even the most arduous and debilitating human suffering but only, as repeatedly shown, at very great cost to one’s soul. Many *hibakusha* and their family members could not bear the physical torment that was inflicted by the thermal and radiation effects of the bomb. Some of the five *hibakusha* contemplated suicide many times. Many years passed before

some would even venture out of their homes fearing the stares that their scars and disfigurement provoked. But as hard to believe as this may be, there is more to this book of personal memoirs, medical miracles and historical facts.

The underlying question this book asks is why Americans currently know so little about the experiences of atomic bomb victims? The book itself tries to fill that void by describing the suffering the *hibakusha* experienced — an unpleasant subject and one with moral repercussions. There was suppression of this information by the U.S. government just after the war. That of course, no longer exists. Why do we remain in ignorance?

Part of the answer lies in the ghastly human suffering itself. It is difficult, horrendous, and disturbing subject matter. In such books as *Longing for the Bomb* by Lindsay Freeman and *Building the H Bomb* authored by Kenneth Ford, both recently reviewed in this journal, this realization of the bomb's human cost, even if not fully understood by the protagonists, had, in most cases, wrenching emotional effects. The question of ignorance bridges to another question: why was the catastrophic human toll not completely known? Suppression of that information as explained by Southard was one cause. Ignorance, the historically convenient companion of many of mankind's follies, was another.

For several reasons, the novelty of atom bomb technology, the need to deploy it quickly, the lack of empirical data about the levels of ionizing radiation produced by the bomb, and, especially, the unfamiliarity of its biological effects, all worked to undermine significant consideration about the effects the weapon would have on people. U.S. officials, particularly Manhattan Project director Gen-

eral Lesley Groves, made certain that discussions of radiation effects were silent ones. It was, according to Southard, a vigorous attempt to protect the reputation of the United States and the lawful use of the bomb. Groves deflected the issue away, claiming that if the end of the war was uncomfortable to ponder, remembering how it began would ease the turmoil.

It was not until September 1951 that the ten-year state of war between Japan and the U.S. ended. Not until April 1952 did the six-year U.S. occupation of Japan end. In that time, Japan's communications link with the outside world had been severed. U.S. censorship restrictions had held sway. No travel by foreigners into the country or by Japanese out of the country had been permitted. Once lifted, access to atomic bomb health effects studied and compiled by Japanese and American scientists and medical practitioners was finally allowed. The damage, death, and suffering were finally made known to the Japanese public. Illegally withheld photographs and film were released by their Japanese concealers. In the U.S., information began to flow as well. *Life* magazine published photos of the *hibakusha* in 1952 and John Hersey published his landmark book *Hiroshima*. Yet as Southard explains, U.S. policies of denial and censorship kept Americans uninformed about the ghastly effects of whole body radiation exposure — the human toll of the atomic bomb. President Truman never fully acknowledged the human impact — although as Southard explains, some of his statements indicate his awareness. Instead, the Cold War accelerated along with the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The travails of the *hibakusha* played second fiddle to the mad dash to nuclear supremacy.

To right this imbalance, Southard has chronicled the post-apocalyptic stories of 18-year-old streetcar driver Wada Koichi, 16-year-old student Nagano Etsuko, daughter of a Mitsubishi employee, 15-year-old Mitsubishi Arms Factory employee Doh-oh Mineko, 16-year-old post-office worker Taniguchi Sumiteru, and 13-year-old student Yoshida Katsuji, from the moments just before they were all ravaged by the thermal and blast effects of the Nagasaki bomb to their later, remarkably productive senior years. The tales are riveting. Southard has compiled first-hand accounts of nuclear survival: what it was like to be in the midst of a cataclysmic atomic maelstrom. All survived by luck. All depended on distance, what lay between the victims and the blast, even which way they were facing and what they were wearing. The tragic poignancy of Mineko's story exemplifies the horror each faced though truth be told, their individual anguish was/is unique and cannot be compared. The Mitsubishi factory, located three quarters of a mile from the hypocenter, collapsed literally on top of her. Fellow workers were thrown by the blast across the factory floor. She was able to extricate herself and, following a fellow worker through the darkness and smoke, made it outside where she met two fellow students who had also emerged from nearby ruins. The world around them had been transformed into a nightmare. Scorched corpses lay on the ground amidst splintered glass, twisted metal and wire. Mothers were sobbing over dead children. Hundreds of men and women were staggering around, many already with blistered skin falling from their outstretched arms. They looked grey or even colorless with dark holes for their eyes and mouths. Many were



half naked. As for Mineko, she could not keep up with her two friends. Her injuries, at first incomprehensible to her due to the shocking circumstances, were severe. She was burned over the left side of her body. A bone protruded out of her right arm. Glass splinters in the hundreds had impacted her body and blood covered her neck. Once she realized her injuries and perhaps more so because she was now alone, she cried out for her father.

The resurrection of these five remarkable individuals reveals the brilliance of this book. Each eventually sought solace and meaning to their lives not only by surviving, but also by finding some acceptance in Japanese society — some by achieving great career success — many without publically revealing their *hibakusha* status. Doh-oh Mineko chose the latter, immersing herself in her life-long love of fashion by moving to Tokyo, forgoing marriage lest her medical history be revealed and eventually, through long hours, sacrifice and dedication, became in 1973 the first-ever woman executive at her company. Never “cured” of her atomic trauma by a lifetime of hard work, Doh-oh was periodically haunted by the self-imposed separation from her family and decades-long devotion to proving herself in business. Eventually retirement, loneliness, the death of her mother and the persuasion of her sister determined that a return to Nagasaki was in her best interest. Indeed, the return was auspicious for it put Doh-oh

in contact with those in Nagasaki who protested nuclear weapons particularly those weapons supposedly on visiting U.S. naval vessels, and more importantly by the resident *hibakusha* who freely admitted their wartime experiences. A male friend who was present when she was returned home injured by the bomb, read of her business success and found her these many years later. His involvement in the Nagasaki Foundation for the Promotion of Peace and his influence convinced Doh-oh to join the organization’s public speaking circuit to recount her experiences.

All five *hibakusha* have told their stories — not in the safety of the pages of magazines or books, but orally, in public and often with those in influential positions such as United Nations dignitaries. They travel to schools throughout Japan and have visited schools in the U.S. as well. Their mission is not merely to remind the world of the grotesque injuries and deaths from the use of nuclear weapons, it is to educate new generations that have little conception of the power and abject, horrific, long-lasting pain use of these weapons brings. Their advocacy is a message of prevention. The next questions are obvious. Once the *hibakusha are gone*, how will we teach future generations to forestall the use of nuclear weapons? How do we impress upon future generations an understanding about hell unleashed on earth?

The tales of the five *hibakusha* are not for the faint of heart. The stories run

deep with nearly indescribable physical and emotional pain. They are studded with loss: loved ones killed or never seen again; the loss of physical normality from the scars caused by thermal burns; the loss of standing in society by their disfigurement. There were years of constant anguish from the physical pain that these scars induced. But rebirth and resurrection into Japanese and indeed world society for some of them brings hope and a sense of completion to their amazing stories of survival and accomplishment. This reviewer does not possess the talent to further describe what Southard has done so brilliantly. She has brought the horrid facts of surviving the bomb out in the open in a manner so well written that she has not only honored the efforts of the *hibakusha* to enlighten the public about the human effects of nuclear weapons, but she has also created a must-read for all scientists and policy makers who have made nuclear non-proliferation their career. Southard has not only immortalized the efforts of the *hibakusha*, she has preserved their message of rebirth from the precipice of death. She has revived their hope of peace for a world burdened by the double-sided sword of nuclear technology.

Immerse yourself in this story. You may cringe at the suffering, but it will undoubtedly give you reason, motivation, and the passion needed to prevent proliferation of the world’s most dangerous weapons.