

**Voices of Hiroshima (2025 REBROADCAST)
Transcript**

John Biewen: Hi everybody, it's John Biewen. Today, during this between-seasons hiatus, I'm re-posting an episode from our archives on an important anniversary. 80 years ago now, on August 6, 1945: the first use of an atomic weapon. By the United States, of course, against the first of two Japanese cities.

I don't know about you, but I think for a lot of people, when we hear the word "Hiroshima," the first image that comes to mind is a mushroom cloud. We probably don't think about the actual place, least of all the modern, post-war place, a city on Japan's Kyushu Island with a million people and office buildings and markets and a pro baseball team.

By now, the vast majority of the people who lived through August 6th 1945 in that city are gone. But three decades ago, many thousands of A-bomb survivors still lived in the city. I went there then in 1995 and interviewed some of them. I'd lived in Japan for a couple years in the 1980s and spoke the language, kind of. I went back in '95 to make a documentary for the 50th anniversary of the bombing for Minnesota Public Radio and Public Radio International. Then, just about ten years ago, I made a rebuilt version of that 1995 program – that's what I'm sharing with you here.

Most of the voices you'll hear over the next half hour are silent now. They are voices of Hiroshima.

[Japanese train station recorded announcement]

John Biewen: The places where history happened often test the imagination. You can put up a monument or a plaque, but that doesn't make it easy to picture a bloody battle or a disaster. This place - this gleaming city with its shiny trains, and green lawns, and bright flowers - it asks you to imagine Armageddon. The recorded announcement reminds passengers getting off the train, 'Be careful not to forget anything.'

There are explicit reminders at the heart of the city, where the Aioi Bridge crosses the Motoyasu River. The bridge's distinctive T-shape gave the pilot of the Enola Gay his target on August 6th, 1945. The bomber scored a near bullseye. On the west side of the river, there's a 30-foot clock tower built after the war. The designer gave it twisted steel girders, a reference to the 5,000-degree heat blast. The atomic bomb, codenamed 'Little Boy', exploded 1,700 ft overhead at 8:15 that morning. So every morning at 8:15, the clock sounds.

[Sound of clock striking, then ominous drone]

Female survivor: We were just about to eat breakfast and it flashed! I thought, 'Lightning? That's strange,' but then the kitchen window shattered.

Male survivor: I covered my face with my hands and then I was thrown somewhere. I don't know where.

SCENE ON RADIO

Female survivor: The house tumbled down and then knocked me out. My four-year-old child came to me and I took her in my arms but then I lost consciousness.

Male survivor: I jumped out of the window of the factory and looked towards the center of Hiroshima. An enormous white mushroom stood in the sky. As the white mushroom rose higher and higher, then a deep, red mushroom also rose up. That was an incredible thing. Next, a pitch dark mushroom billowed up.

John Biewen: The numbers you hear for the death toll are just a rough guess. The bomb wiped out all physical traces of thousands of lives, including the census records that showed those people ever existed. Estimates say that in a sprawling city of 3-400,000, about one-third, roughly 100,000, died. Fifty years later, in 1995, it was said that more than 100,000 A-bomb survivors still lived in Hiroshima, but even then, most residents had moved in from elsewhere or were born after the war.

Yuki Sumida: I come here often. Just because it's a park near the center of the city. It's quiet.

John Biewen: Yuki Sumida, 20-years-old, was sitting on a bench beside the river before catching a streetcar to her job at the Mitsubishi auto plant. She was sitting almost in the shadow of the Atomic Bomb Dome, a ruin of the former Hiroshima Industrial Promotion Hall. The city preserves the crumbled stone and brick building as a photogenic symbol of nuclear devastation. The ruin is capped by the steel skeleton of the building's domed roof. Yuki tells me she passes this spot every day, but she and friends her age don't give much thought to what happened here.

Yuki Sumida: It doesn't come up in conversation. It's talk for the past generation. Even within Japan, people hear 'Hiroshima' and their only image is the atomic bomb. Having the A-bomb drop on you isn't much of an image for a city.

[Sound of whistles and shouting]

John Biewen: Lots of the people in the city would rather be known for their baseball team, the Hiroshima Carp. Most of Japan's pro baseball teams were formed by big corporations in the metropolises of Tokyo and Osaka. In Hiroshima, local residents took up a collection to start their team in the 1950s, despite their postwar poverty. This is all explained to me by my companion at the game, Mitsuhiro Yoshida, who is a reporter for the local paper.

Mitsuhiro Yoshida: Around this stadium, there was a lot of shabby houses and huge slums.

John Biewen: Now glass buildings with flashing neon signs tower over the grandstand. The Carp won the Japan Series three times in the 1970s and '80s. Their fans are among the proudest and the rowdiest in the Japanese League. Mitsuhiro says the Carp are a proud symbol of their town's rebirth and of the determination of its people.

SCENE ON RADIO

Mitsuhiro Yoshida: Carp is a big fish in Japan. They sometimes climb up the waterfalls because they have very strong energy and are brave.

John Biewen: But for some in Hiroshima, rebirth is not as important as memory. On an April day in 1995, busloads of sixth-graders filed into an auditorium at the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation. The kids from across Japan, who visit by the thousands every year, get to hear directly from hibakusha, 'explosion sufferers'. On this day, the speaker is Michiko Yamaoka, a forceful 65-year-old woman with black hair, wearing a navy blue suit. She tells the children that on that morning, 50 years before, an air raid warning went off when an American B-29 made a reconnaissance flight over Hiroshima. The all-clear sounded just before 8 o'clock. Most people, including Michiko, left their neighborhood air raid shelters. She walked towards the city center where she worked for the wartime Mobilized Youth. It's still a mystery why the Japanese air defenses did not sound a warning when the Enola Gay approached the city.

Michiko Yamaoka: I heard the sound of an airplane. I saw the flash. It had very beautiful colors - blue and yellow - very beautiful. I did not know it would burn my face.

John Biewen: Miss Yamaoka had cosmetic surgery 27 times. She tells the children that until recently, she was embarrassed by her leathery burn scars. For years, she lived with her mother and hid from view. She finally came to believe she had a duty to talk about the A-bomb.

Michiko Yamaoka: I don't want it to become just an old tale. Until I die, I can't forget these wounds in my heart and the tragedy I saw with these eyes. But the nation is at peace and so people are trying to forget. Maybe that's human nature.

John Biewen: Some of the hibakusha I spoke with talked about their frustration that others could not fathom what they'd lived through. In Japan, tact and reticence are highly valued, especially when it comes to uncomfortable subjects. But some hibakusha tell grisly A-bomb stories eagerly.

Female survivor: Everywhere I looked, the houses were flattened like frogs that someone had stamped on. I thought, 'There is not such a thing that would destroy like this.'

Male survivor: I met a group of 40 or 50 people walking around mindlessly. They walked with their hands out in front of them like ghosts. They were burned and blistered all over their bodies. They held their hands out because their skin was peeling off their arms.

Female survivor: Everybody was shivering and saying, 'Water, water, water.' One faucet was working a little bit and so people lined up to drink from their hands. They then threw up yellow liquid. My children and I threw up too.

SCENE ON RADIO

Male survivor: A lot of people went to drink water from the rivers and tipped over and died right there. At the time, there were seven rivers flowing through Hiroshima. Those seven rivers had bodies and bodies floating in them.

Female survivor: There were two kids, a boy and a girl, saying, 'Mother, mother.' They were screaming their mother's name all night long. When I looked again in the morning, the children's breathing had stopped. The soldier dug a big hole and threw their bodies in it together, put kerosene on them and burned them.

Male survivor: The smell of burning bodies hung over the entire city. It was an awful smell which hung over the city until about the end of that year. There has been a lot of talk about the A-bomb but the smell hasn't been reported much. The indescribable smell at that time, the smell of dead bodies, I will never forget.

John Biewen: For atomic bomb survivors, the lesson of Hiroshima is simple and clear. Nuclear weapons should never have been used and must never be used again. But for millions of Japan's wartime victims and enemies, the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki stood for other things: liberation, survival, even fair punishment. There's a common perception in the West that Japan has not owned up to its crimes in the World War Two period the way Germany has. There is a clear difference between those two former Axis allies at the level of their national governments. Japan's Asian neighbors complain, decade after decade, that the country's textbooks gloss over Japanese aggression. Japan didn't agree until 2015 to pay reparations to the few remaining 'comfort women', the estimated 200,000 Korean women forced into sexual slavery during the war. But I met many thoughtful Japanese, including A-bomb survivors, who showed a pained awareness of their military government's actions leading up to August 6th, 1945. This is from a poem by Sadako Kurihara, a Hiroshima native who survived the bomb.

[Reading of *When We Say 'Hiroshima'*]

Say 'Hiroshima' and hear 'Pearl Harbor'
Say 'Hiroshima' and hear 'Rape of Nanking'
Say 'Hiroshima' and hear of women and children thrown into trenches, doused with gasoline, and burned alive in Manila

That we may say 'Hiroshima and hear in reply, gently,
'Ah, Hiroshima'
We must cleanse our filthy hands

[Sound: lapping water, boat engines]

John Biewen: Hiroshima's Ujina Harbor was a center of Japanese shipbuilding and a major port for the navy during the country's years of Asian conquest. Since the war, the harbor serves commercial ships, passenger ferries and fishing boats. Moon Shi Kang and his wife run a Korean restaurant near the harbor.

SCENE ON RADIO

Moon Shi Kang: Japanese say, 'We are the only victims.' They are victims in one sense. But as the ones who started the war, they are also perpetrators and so they have a heavy responsibility.

John Biewen: In 1995, Kang was 77 years old and leader of the Korean Residents' Union in Japan. He said not only had the Japanese Government not fully owned up to its aggression against its Asian neighbors, but the country also failed to acknowledge that many atomic bomb victims were non-Japanese who had already been victimized by Japan. Kang's family moved to Hiroshima in 1929 to escape poverty in his homeland after Japan colonized Korea. The A-bomb killed his father and brother.

Moon Shi Kang: There were two types of Koreans living in Hiroshima: people like me who have come to Hiroshima to settle, and others who, when the war heated up, were brought as so-called 'draftees' or forced laborers. About 15% of all the atomic bomb victims were Koreans. There were Chinese, too, but they were smaller numbers, some hundreds.

John Biewen: The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum had long displayed artifacts of the atomic bombing: the burned clothing of children, photos of charred bodies, a set of stone steps imprinted with the shadow of a man vaporized by the blast. But for decades there was almost no reference to the war that preceded August 6th. Finally, in the '90s, after long debate, museum officials opened a new wing. It described Hiroshima's role as a center of Japanese militarism before and during the war. Hiroshi Kodama was the museum's curator.

Hiroshi Kodama: We do not want to present a one-sided view of the atomic bombing. We must present the bomb in the larger context of the war and look again at the ways in which Hiroshima participated in that war.

John Biewen: The new museum wing documents the military education that Hiroshima's children got during the war years, which shows women practising with bamboo spears that the government issued to all Japanese in preparation for a US invasion. There's a photo of a lantern parade held in Hiroshima in 1937, celebrating the Japanese capture of the Chinese capital Nanjing, where Japanese soldiers slaughtered Chinese civilians.

Moon Shi Kang: The Nanjing Massacre. There are Japanese who say it didn't happen, but it is a fact that when Japan arrived at the city of Nanjing, various brutal and tragic events happened. As for the number of victims, some say it was more than 300,000. Others say, No, it was 20-30,000.

John Biewen: So yes, Mr. Kodama says, Japan needs to acknowledge its atrocities. But he argues it's still appropriate that the central message of the museum is a cry against nuclear weapons.

Hiroshi Kodama: It's well-known that nuclear weapons were used against human beings for the first time in Hiroshima. We think it is Hiroshima's role to present what

SCENE ON RADIO

that was like, so that people all over the world will understand that this must never be repeated.

John Biewen: This must never be repeated. It's almost a mantra in Hiroshima. It's also the kind of language used by survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. Some Japanese argue that dropping nuclear bombs on civilian populations was a crime comparable to the Holocaust. They say what makes the weapons uniquely cruel is the way they continue to kill and disfigure. 79-year-old Kunizo Hatanaka and his daughter Yuriko lived in tiny house in Iwakuni, an hour's train ride outside of Hiroshima. Yuriko was middle-aged in 1995 with some greys in her hair. She couldn't read the newspaper she rustled in her hands. She stared vacantly at the paper and asked, again and again, whether her favorite Samurai actor would be on TV that night. Her father answered, 'Yes, yes,' over and over.

Kunizo Hatanaka: I was not there for the A-bomb. I was a soldier on Shikoku Island. My family was in Hiroshima. They suffered the bombing. This child was born after the fact, and for my family the impact of that bomb grew with time.

John Biewen: The elder Hatanaka explained that his daughter was born in February 1946 with microcephaly. She was one of about 30 babies born with severe mental retardation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the months after the atomic bombings. That's five times the normal number of mentally handicapped children in that time frame. Doctors believe nuclear radiation harmed babies who were developing in their mother's wombs when the bombs fell. The Hatanaka's other child, an infant at the time, died of radiation sickness a few weeks after the bombing. The father, Kunizo, thinks radiation also caused the cancer that killed his wife in 1978. Years later, the aging father and daughter spend their days sitting in his small shop in the front of their house or watching Samurai movies on video.

[Sound of TV]

Kunizo Hatanaka: She has books but she cannot read. She cannot take care of herself and she needs my help to go to the bathroom or take a bath. After 50 years, she has the intellect and IQ of a child of two years and three months old. She's just a baby.

John Biewen: In the months and years after the bombing, thousands of survivors, hibakusha, showed the symptoms of A-bomb disease: bleeding gums, hair loss, red spots showing through the skin. Some who got the symptoms died and others recovered. A 30-year study found that among A-bomb survivors who got a high dose of radiation, the cancer rate was 60% above normal. In my interview with Michiko Yamaoka, the survivor who told her story to schoolchildren, she mentioned almost as an afterthought that she had cancer.

Michiko Yamaoka: I'm 65 and so maybe it's the sickness of old age. My aunt and uncle died of stomach cancer. Before they died, they vomited black blood. Now I think that was radiation. You always wonder if it's in your body too. You worry. You live every day with fear.

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John Biewen: Many hibakusha also lived out their days poor and alone, outcasts in their own country. A person's genetic pedigree is so important in Japan that some families hire investigators to check into the health backgrounds of prospective brides and grooms. A-bomb survivors were seen as damaged goods. 63-year-old Katsumi Fukumizu lived in a nursing home in central Hiroshima, one set up especially for hibakusha. He was healthy but one side of his face had a big, yellowish scar and one ear was partly burned away.

Katsumi Fukumizu: I've lived a miserable life these 50 years. I couldn't find work. Nobody would hire me. They would say, 'Ah, it's one of those A-bomb victims from Hiroshima!' And I couldn't get a bride because of these scars. Do you understand what I'm saying? These are facts.

John Biewen: Some A-bomb survivors told me the world outside Japan overlooked their suffering for the same reason that it failed to condemn the country that dropped the atomic bombs. That is, because winners get to write history. Again, this is Kunizo Hatanaka, the father of the mentally handicapped Yuriko.

Kunizo Hatanaka: Once we lost the war, our top leaders were arrested and convicted of war crimes and executed. But America won the war, and so Truman and the others who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima got away with it. If they had gone through the war crimes trial, the people who dropped the atomic bombs would have been punished too.

[Sound: Peace Memorial Park]

John Biewen: Shortly after the atomic bombing, rumors swirled through Hiroshima. The city would be uninhabitable for decades, maybe a century. Plants and trees would never grow in the city again. Those rumors were wrong. Life was more tenacious. Fifty years later, teenagers practice hip hop steps on the green lawns of the Peace Park. Picnickers laugh and drink sake under the cherry trees. Peace activists ask for donations from tourists and people from out of town stroll past the monuments and the eternal Peace Flame.

Naoko Mizuno: It's real peaceful, isn't it? A good place. People gathering and having fun. There's no such place in my town.

John Biewen: Naoko Mizuno lives in central Japan. She's visiting Hiroshima for the first time, dropping off her daughter at a local university. Sitting on a bench in the park, she manages to find an almost happy ending to the A-bomb story. Through all the wars since World War Two, she points out, no country has again resorted to nuclear weapons. Naoko says that's a gift that Hiroshima and Nagasaki gave the world.

Naoko Mizuno: If they wouldn't have dropped it on Hiroshima, they would have used it somewhere. The results were publicized and so we knew what kind of thing it was. The anti-nuclear movement was born and now the weapons can't be used. So

SCENE ON RADIO

Hiroshima was really unlucky, but there are people who have been saved by Hiroshima.

John Biewen: The notion of having sacrificed for the peace of others does not comfort Michiko Yamaoka, whose face was burned by the bomb. She tells visiting schoolchildren, and anyone else who asks, that there's still far too little peace in the world to feel Hiroshima has been heard.

Michiko Yamaoka: My anger? I want to fling it at nations. The Japanese nation started the war. The United States dropped the atomic bombs. Wars are started by nations, but it's we who suffer. Civilians. Regular people. I detest war.

[Sound: flowing water, crows]

John Biewen: Another morning along the Motoyasu River, across from the clock that chimes every day at 8:15 AM. I strike up a conversation with a grey-haired man in a tweed jacket, sneakers and a cotton fishing cap. He's squatting on a stone walkway in front of a small easel, sketching the atomic bomb dome. Hiroshi Hara is 63, a retired railroad employee. He smiles easily and gently but he tells me, when he looks at the dome and the river, he sees August 1945.

Hiroshi Hara: Even now, if I walk the places that I walked then, I can remember the scenes I saw then. The appearance has changed completely but it's still there inside my head. But now, this building is all that remains as a symbol of those places.

John Biewen: The day the bomb fell, Mr. Hara happened to be out of town, visiting his grandmother on an island across the bay. He saw the mushroom cloud from a distance. He came back the next day to find the rivers filled with floating, burnt bodies. Among the dead were hundreds of his schoolmates. Mr. Hara worries that when the hibakusha are gone, no one will be left to get the story across to make people feel what it was like. After we talk for a while, he gives me one of his finished renderings of the domed ruin. It's a detailed pencil drawing, painted over in delicate watercolor - very light tans, greys and blues.

Hiroshi Hara: Everybody looks at my paintings and says, 'they are so gentle.' I cannot use colors such as red and black. On that August 7th I saw charred black and lots of blood flowing. and so my paintings naturally come out like this. I paint with water that I draw from this river. Why? Because this river saw the Hiroshima of that August 6th and after. This river did. It knows. And a lot of people died seeking water from this river. This water has memories too.

[Sound: Crows, passing bicycles and cars]

John Biewen: My thanks across the miles and the years to the people of Hiroshima who spoke with me. Michiko Yamaoka, the hibakusha whose face was burned, died in 2013. She was 82. The voiceovers were by Yoko Breckenridge, Yas Motoyoshi, Noriaki Matoki, Gene Kim, Kazuko Shiba, Tomoko Fujiwara, and Yoshi Amao. John Scherf was the technical director for the original version of this documentary. It was

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called '*Hiroshima: the River Remembers*'. That piece and this one are Minnesota Public Radio productions from American Public Media. Our website is sceneonradio.org. We're on Facebook and Twitter @sceneonradio. If you're new to the show, welcome. By all means, subscribe. *Scene on Radio* comes to you from CDS, the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

[Outro music]