



DEATH IN LIFE

SURVIVORS OF HIROSHIMA

ROBERT JAY
LIFTON

WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

ROBERT JAY LIFTON

DEATH

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PREFACE

It is hard for me to believe that almost three decades have passed since my wife and I arrived in Hiroshima for the first time. But I have no doubt that what I learned there has affected everything I have done or felt since. Hiroshima, along with its pain, offers a special kind of illumination.

For many years I felt lonely in relation to my Hiroshima experience. It was part of our family life—our son had his first birthday there—but distanced from the imagination of most Americans. I felt a survivor-like responsibility to make known in my own country, through writings and talks, what I found there. The work in general, this book in particular, was very well received. Yet I had the distinct sense that people would express their horror but turn away from the subject. Then the Vietnam War and its horrors so preoccupied Americans that Hiroshima-related questions of nuclear danger were blunted. Overall, people resisted knowing—and especially *feeling*—the full truth of Hiroshima because that truth was too threatening, too unfamiliar in its dimensions, and, for Americans, a potential accusation.

During the 1970s all that changed. People in the United States and throughout the world became more interested in Hiroshima. They gradually recognized that what happened there had great relevance for their own struggles with nuclear weapons. The relevance was not simply a question of levels of destruction: by then the Hiroshima bomb had become old-

fashioned in comparison to hydrogen bombs that could bring about 10, 100, or even 1,000 Hiroshimas in a single explosion. Rather, Hiroshima and Nagasaki came to be seen as having special value for the world. Only in those two places had human beings been subjected to the radically new weapons technology, many of them capable of rendering powerful accounts of what they had experienced.

These accounts gradually, all too gradually I would say, began to enter into nuclear-weapons discussions. Once that happened, those discussions could no longer be confined to detached “scenarios” of nuclear “exchange”—calm projections of what amounted to planetary self-destruction put forward by advocates of nuclear weapons on behalf of what they called “deterrence” and “national security.” The result was that more people could share the sentiment expressed to me by a Hiroshima survivor commenting on nuclear testing by the United States and the Soviet Union: “It is utterly absurd. Both countries seem to be playing a sort of game . . . because they don’t really grasp its terror.” Hiroshima survivors could grasp that terror all too readily. More than any other group, they convey a sense of human consequences that counters the murderous abstractions of nuclear-war planners.

That human reality is still insufficiently appreciated, as evidenced by attitudes expressed during the Persian Gulf War of 1990–91. Among the many reasons given by President Bush and others in his administration for mounting a devastating attack on Iraq, the most effective, polls showed, was the claim that the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, was close to acquiring nuclear weapons. The claim was systematically exaggerated, but the response suggested that nuclear fear did exist and could be manipulatively exploited. During the war itself, there was serious talk by elected American officials about the desirability of using small “tactical” nuclear weapons in the ground war in order to “save American lives.” It would seem that national leaders are more prone to invoke the human consequences of their adversaries’ weapons than those of their own. Moreover, American decision makers had no hesitation about using newly developed “conventional” weapons almost as draconian as nuclear bombs. Yet some general appreciation of the human consequences of nuclear weapons is reflected in the simple fact that, despite the many wars and military campaigns of their possessors, the weapons have not been used since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors deserve more credit than they have received for bringing about this degree of restraint. As truth tellers where

truth is resisted, they have been a crucial source of wisdom. Their narratives have informed the work of every authentic chronicler of nuclear threat, whether through interviews with American or Japanese or other investigators or tireless public testimony which they have given in countries throughout the world. Their words and images, in ways that are not easily measurable, have contributed, as nothing else has, to a collective world consciousness of nuclear danger. For that reason we can say that atomic-bomb survivors made a considerable contribution to the evolving Soviet-American nuclear detente during the mid- and late 1980s. And it was they who could make the most authoritative connections between nuclear weapons and the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, even if the latter resulted from “peaceful” use of atomic energy, since the radioactive consequences of both were all too similar. It is not too much to say that atomic-bomb survivors, through no choice of their own, have taken on the prophetic function of warning their people—in this case the people of the world—about the error of their ways.

When I interviewed survivors in 1962, they told me of their ordeal in painful detail. I felt responsible, as a researcher, to record fully their suffering and their conflicts. I did point out that the majority of survivors managed to resume their lives, to marry and have children and work. But in order to convey the full impact of the bomb, I had to focus strongly on the kinds of fear and pain it had induced. Now it is important to balance those findings with equally full recognition of what survivors have been able to accomplish.

During visits I made to Hiroshima in the 1970s and 1980s, I found survivors to be striking a new tone in expressing their determination to move beyond what they called “victim consciousness.” By that they meant breaking out of the identity of the victim and asserting their more inclusive humanity. This seemed to be an important step for many in reconstituting their existence after undergoing the most extreme form of trauma. A related emphasis was adopting a universalistic principle, so that their collective voice could transcend political antagonisms and conflicts between rival peace movements. Some survivor groups reached out still further and participated in exchanges with survivors of Auschwitz. We may say that Hiroshima survivors, together with their vital message of ultimate threat, also convey a hopeful principle of human malleability and strength.

Hiroshima survivors are, of course, an aging population. They frequently express concern about who will tell the story of Hiroshima when they are no longer around. I have heard Auschwitz survivors express the

same concern. Clearly, the obligation of the rest of us is to record what they tell us for the benefit of future generations and to reflect on it now for the benefit of our immediate world.

In a recent book (which I wrote with Eric Markusen) entitled *The Genocidal Mentality*, I explored certain parallels between the Nazi Holocaust and nuclear threat, while stressing their very important historical differences. In both we learn how existing technology makes it increasingly easy for ordinary people to participate in or support genocidal projects. That genocidal mentality can be brought about only by excluding, through some form of psychic numbing or dissociation, the kinds of human consequences Hiroshima survivors tell us about.

At the end of that book I discuss, as an alternative to a genocidal mentality, patterns of species consciousness. By that term I mean a significant awareness of being a member of the human species. My argument is that nuclear weapons press us in the direction of species consciousness. As we take in their full truth, their capacity to come close to eliminating us as a species, we develop a sense of shared fate through which each individual self can come to feel a beginning bond with every other self on the planet. The process can be enhanced by the mass media revolution, which renders commonplace images of the most alien cultures and people. We then move toward forming what I call a species self, an actual psychological development that enables one's sense of common humanity to have significant influence upon one's feelings and actions. This does not mean giving up more immediate identities—one remains a Japanese or an American or a Nigerian, a father or daughter or wife, a physician or construction worker or artist. But all of these elements of the self become subsumed to one's overall sense of belonging to humankind.

Species consciousness is not just a distant ideal but a practical and realizable state of mind. Indeed, the principle of "common security"—of no nation being secure unless all are—is a manifestation of species consciousness on the part of Americans, Soviets, and others throughout the world. There is no denying, of course, the power of forces in the opposite direction, of polarization of every kind and of ethnic and religious violence. But our historical and evolutionary capacity for identifying ourselves with our species has never been greater.

If we take its truths seriously, Hiroshima can further extend that capacity on behalf of the human future.

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DEATH IN LIFE

INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH AND RESEARCHER

Research is a form of re-creation. I have tried to record the most important psychological consequences of exposure to the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. In order to relate the atomic survivor to general human experience, I extended the inquiry to include a wider concept of “the survivor” as an entity highly relevant to our times. These concerns in turn led to a study of death symbolism and the overall impact of nuclear weapons, which will be published later as a separate volume entitled *The Broken Connection*.

Hiroshima stimulates ready resistance within the would-be researcher. It does so partly because of its specific association with massive death and mutilation, and partly because of the general reluctance of those in the human sciences to risk professional confrontation with great historical events which do not lend themselves to established approaches or categories. In any case, I have little doubt of my own resistance to Hiroshima; I had lived and worked in Japan for a total of more than four years, over ten-year period, before I finally visited the city in early April of 1962.

At that time I was completing two years of research on Japanese youth, as part of a long-standing interest in the interplay between individual psychology and historical change, or in “psychohistorical

process." In Kyoto, where I was working, I thought only occasionally about the world's first atomic bombed city, which lay about two hundred miles to the southwest. Nor was Hiroshima mentioned particularly frequently by the young men and women, mostly university undergraduates, whom I was interviewing daily—except by those who happened to have grown up in its general area. The great majority had either no memory of the war at all or only the most meager recollections of it. But what became clear when I explored with them their sense of themselves and their world was the enormous significance for them, however indirectly expressed, of the fact that Japan alone had been exposed to atomic bombs. This historical "fact" had much to do with the power of the peace symbol for all Japanese. It played a very important part in the anti-war sentiment of the mass demonstrations of 1960, an extraordinary spectacle which I was able to observe closely and to discuss with militant young participants when they could free themselves for a few moments from their demanding activities on the streets. And it was a matter to contend with even in the "Revival Boom" which followed—the reawakened interest in war films, military music, and the literature of military strategy.

These seemingly opposite tendencies can be understood as related parts of a general struggle to cope with an unmastered past and a threatening future, a struggle in which Hiroshima faces both ways. The atomic bombings were experienced, even by Japanese born after they took place, as both an annihilatory culmination of a disastrous period of home-grown fascism and militarism, and a sudden infliction of a new and equally unfortunate historical destiny—a destiny which could, moreover, be repeated, and which was open to everyone. What I am saying is that nuclear weapons left a powerful imprint upon the Japanese which continues to be transmitted, historically and psychologically, through the generations. But I could not begin to understand the complexities of this imprint until I embarked upon my work with Hiroshima victims themselves.

One effect the atomic bombings had upon the Japanese, I soon discovered, was to create an intensity of feeling which could interfere with evaluating their human impact. When I began to look into the matter during two preliminary visits to Hiroshima, I discovered that despite the seventeen years that had passed since the bomb, no Japanese individual or group had carried out a detailed or systematic study of its general psychological and social effects. The few scholars who had initiated such studies had cut them short, and had either reported their

findings in fragmentary, exaggeratedly technical form, or else had been so struck by the human suffering encountered that they ceased their research and dedicated themselves to programs of much-needed social welfare. Nor had anything more than preliminary surveys been attempted by Americans, despite their extensive involvement in studies of physical aftereffects. Here too it appeared that there were important emotional impediments.*¹

The complexities of the research were to impress themselves upon me soon enough, but before discussing them it is well to say a word about factors contributing to my own involvement in the work. With a problem of this kind it is particularly mischievous to pretend that the investigator undertakes his study as a *tabula rasa* or an uncontaminated "instrument," totally free of bias or preconception. In my case there were at least three important influences upon both my decision to attempt the research and my way of going about it: a professional and personal interest in East Asian culture responsible for my being in Japan at the time; a central intellectual commitment to the study of the extreme historical situations characteristic of our era, and to the evolution of a suitable psychological approach to them; and concern with nuclear weapons and with psychological factors influencing war and peace. I had had enough experience to recognize the vicissitudes of work in these broad areas, the importance of a disciplined receptivity to truths built of unusual combinations, and the need to accept limitations in what one could expect to grasp and explain.

I was also aware of the significance of the investigator's relationship to the environment in which he has chosen to work. And I felt drawn to this glitteringly rebuilt, carefully planned city—its new roadways almost too wide and too even for its older atmosphere to encompass, its odd juxtapositions of contemporary tourist hotels and equally contemporary atomic bomb monuments, its attractive entertainment district, the mixed charm and plainness of its streets and of flat terrain that would be undistinguished were it not softened by the many interlacing branches of the Ōta River and set off by mountains in the distance.

But the issue for me in Hiroshima was the atomic bomb. During these first visits I sought out people who could tell me about the bomb's impact upon the city: scholars, writers, artists, doctors and administrators of medical programs, political and religious officials, and leaders of survivor organizations and peace movements. Almost all of these

* Numbered Notes are listed at the back of the book, beginning on page 557.

people had themselves experienced the bomb and then emerged as spokesmen, usually controversial ones, for some segment of the more than ninety thousand survivors in Hiroshima. I also talked to Europeans and Americans, some of them long-term residents of the city, others there on briefer professional and public missions. I heard complicated mixtures of personal experience and public response, and what emerged was less a clear picture than a psychological kaleidoscope of an extraordinary immersion in death, lasting imagery of fear surrounding the possibility of radiation aftereffects, and lifelong struggle to integrate the event and its elaborate web of psychic consequences. Hiroshima struck me as the only place in Japan where people were still, vividly and articulately, aware of World War II—but in a manner so special as to transcend the war itself. The most consistent impression of all was that there was much to be learned in Hiroshima.

I made the decision to extend my stay in Japan and devote six months to a systematic study of atomic bomb survivors. For most of that April, I commuted from Kyoto to Hiroshima; in early May, I moved there and remained until mid-September; and then spent a few additional weeks in Tokyo on atomic bomb issues that could best be pursued there. I conducted the research mainly through individual interviews with two groups of survivors: one consisting of thirty-three chosen at random from the lists kept at the Hiroshima University Research Institute for Nuclear Medicine and Biology* as a representative cross-section of responses; and the second consisting of forty-two survivors especially selected because of their general articulateness and particular prominence in atomic bomb problems—mostly the scholars, writers, physicians, and leaders mentioned before. It turned out that the two groups did not differ significantly in their basic psychological responses; rather, the contrasts in their manner of expression threw varying shades of illumination on common themes.

I have spoken so far of “atomic bomb survivors,” but there is more to be said about the question of names. The Japanese use the term *hibakusha*,† as I shall throughout this book, to delimit those who have experienced the bomb. *Hibakusha* is a coined word whose literal meaning, “explosion-affected person(s),” suggests a little more than

* Names were selected at intervals of five hundred.

† Pronounced hi-bak'-sha. The Romanization system of the 1954 edition of Ken-kyūsha's *New Japanese-English Dictionary* is used throughout the book. Japanese surnames are placed last, following Western rather than Japanese practice, both because they are rendered this way in many medical references cited, and as a means of emphasizing the general relevance of the Japanese experiences described.

merely having encountered the bomb and a little less than having experienced definite injury from it. The category of *hibakusha*, according to official definition, includes four groups of people considered to have had possible exposure to significant amounts of radiation: those who at the time of the bomb were within the city limits of Hiroshima as then defined (an area extending from the hypocenter—the place above which the bomb is thought to have exploded—to a distance of four thousand, and in some places five thousand, meters); those who came into the city within fourteen days and entered a designated area extending to about two thousand meters from the hypocenter; those who came into physical contact with bomb victims, through various forms of aid or disposal of bodies; and those who were *in utero* at the time, and whose mothers fit into any of the first three groups.*

But informally, the word *higaisha*, which means victim or injured party, and definitely conveys the idea of suffering, is used almost as frequently as *hibakusha*; and the Japanese word for survivor, *seizonsha*, is rarely employed by anyone other than scientific investigators, and not too frequently even by them. I was told that Japanese avoid *seizonsha* because it emphasizes the idea of being alive—with the implication that this emphasis is unfair to the less fortunate people who were killed. Thus, simply from the choice of terms, we begin to get a sense of the importance of the pattern of “guilt over survival priority,” which we shall see to be a major theme of the experience, and also of the strength of the residual sense of victimization. Americans, on the other hand, generally use the word survivor, even as a rendering of *hibakusha* or *higaisha*. While this usage may be attributed to conventions surrounding the English word and to the need for a relatively neutral term, it may also reflect American tendencies toward “detoxifying” the experience.

In making arrangements for the interviews, I was aware of my delicate—even Kafkaesque—position as an American psychiatrist approaching people about their feelings concerning the bomb. From the beginning I relied heavily upon introductions—first from Tokyo and Hiroshima colleagues and friends to various individuals and groups in the city (particularly at the university, the medical school, and the City Office), and then from the latter to actual research subjects. In the case

* The exact distance from the hypocenter has great significance for the question of physical aftereffects. It also has importance for psychological responses, but we shall see that these do not lend themselves to the same precise correlation between distance and impact.²

of the randomly selected group, ordinary Japanese who would have been extremely dubious about a direct approach from a psychiatrist or an American, I first made a personal visit to the home, together with a Japanese social worker from the Hiroshima University Research Institute for Nuclear Medicine and Biology. He and I, in fact, spent many exhausting hours that spring and summer on the hot Hiroshima streets, tracking down these dwelling places. He would first present his card to the *hibakusha*, or if he or she were not home, to a family member, explain who I was, and introduce me. I would in turn present my card (which made clear my academic affiliation) and then exchange a few words with the survivor or family member, including a simple explanation of my purposes in undertaking the study. We would then either arrange for an interview appointment (usually in the small office I had rented near the center of the city, but sometimes, particularly in the case of elderly or ill *hibakusha*, right there in the home); or we would set a time for an assistant to return (or else telephone) to make interview arrangements, and frequently to pick up the *hibakusha* and accompany him to my office.

My previous experience in Japan, including the ability to speak a certain amount of Japanese, was helpful in eliciting the many forms of cooperation so crucial to the work. But perhaps of even greater importance was my being able to convey to both colleagues and research subjects my sense of the ethical as well as scientific issues involved: the conviction that it was important to understand people's reactions to exposure to nuclear weapons, and that rather than loose impressions and half-truths, systematic research was needed; and the hope that such research might make some contribution to the mastery of these weapons and the avoidance of their use, as well as to our general knowledge of man.

The community's willingness to trust these motivations was enhanced by a partly (but by no means entirely) fortuitous event—the publication, in the *Asahi Journal* (something like the *New York Times Magazine*) of a Japanese translation of an article I had written six months before on the Japanese peace symbol.³ The article discussed the symbol's psychological ramifications, and while noting various manipulative abuses, argued that if preserved and deepened, it could have universal value. Many Hiroshima intellectuals and officials, including a number of those in my “special group” of research subjects, turned out to have read the article; and whether or not they agreed with everything

it said, it enabled them to overcome whatever suspicion they might have had that I was simply trying to gather militarily useful information for the United States government. For precisely this suspicion had been held in relationship to other American research scientists working in Hiroshima on studies of physical aftereffects, as we shall discuss later.

In all, I was able to obtain excellent cooperation from *hibakusha*. Only on one or two occasions was I unable to arrange at least one detailed interview with people whom I contacted. Involved in this willingness to participate were, I believe, such factors as the response to an authoritative request (from a person or group of considerable standing in the city) that they meet and talk openly with me; the anticipation of finding an outlet for emotions and ideas about the bomb, either in the sense of spreading one's message to the world or of achieving therapeutic relief, or both; and a generally affirmative (though, as we shall see, by no means entirely unambivalent) feeling about my work.

The interviews, usually about two hours in length, were conducted in Japanese with the help of a research assistant trained to interpret in a way that allowed for maximum ease of communication. I tried to see each *hibakusha* twice, though I saw some three or four times and others just once. Throughout all interviews I encouraged spontaneous expressions of thoughts and feelings of any kind. But my questions were focused upon three general dimensions of the problem: recollection of the original experience and exploration of its meaning seventeen years later; residual concerns and fears of all kinds, particularly those surrounding delayed radiation effects; and the survivor's inner "formulation" of his experience, his struggles with mastery and with the overall *hibakusha* identity. I tape-recorded all sessions with research subjects in the randomly selected group, and many of those with the special group as well, always with the individual *hibakusha*'s consent, and had typescripts prepared in romanized Japanese (*rōmaji*) and English, thereby providing me with permanent voice and written records of the original Japanese.

I knew it was inevitable that after seventeen years elements of selectivity and distortion would appear concerning the original experience. I tried to evaluate these, in ways I shall later suggest, as having importance in themselves. But what impressed me throughout the work was the vividness of recall, the sense conveyed that the bomb was falling right there in my office—a vividness which seems to reflect both the