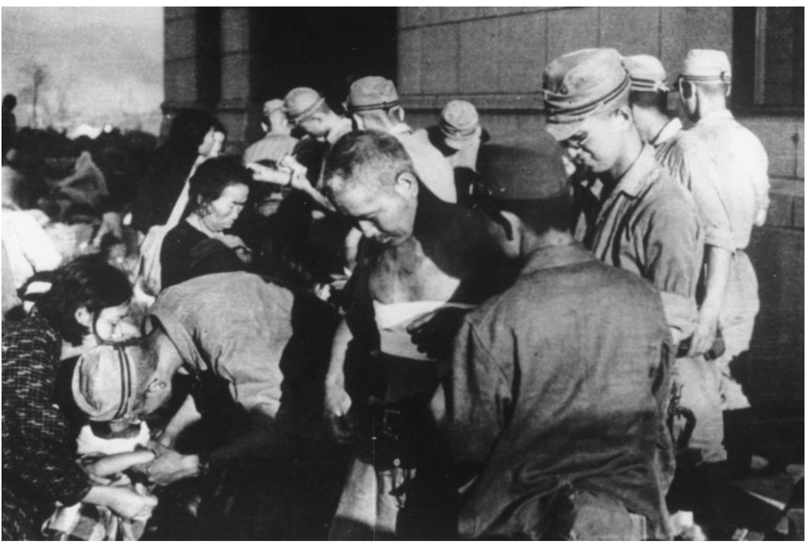
Michiko’s story: How a Japanese girl survived an atomic bomb

As the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to Nihon Hidankyo – the organisation of Japanese atomic bomb survivors – Michiko Kodama’s experiences are testimony to the horrors and long-term effects of nuclear weapons.



Shortly after the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare was dropped by the United States over the Japanese city of Hiroshima, survivors are seen as they receive emergency treatment by military medics, on August 6, 1945. The explosion instantly killed at least 70,000 people, with tens of thousands dying later from the effects of the radioactive fallout [AP Photo]

By George Charles Darley
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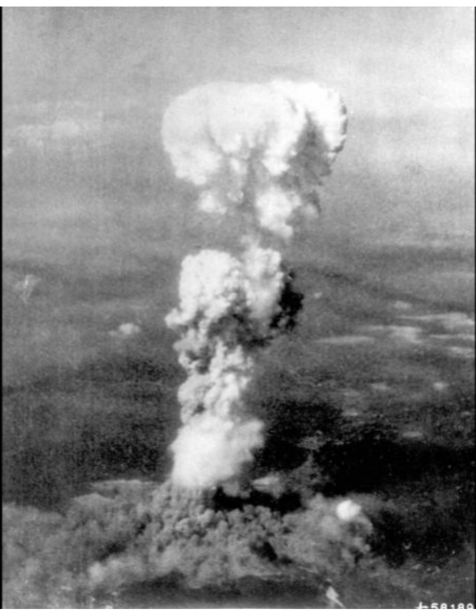
She was only seven years old at the time, but Michiko Kodama has a crystal-clear memory of the morning of August 6, 1945 in Hiroshima, Japan.

“It was a sunny day,” she says. “At 8:15, I was at school, sitting at my desk at the front of the class, when there was a tremendous white flash and the ceiling collapsed. A piece of glass was lodged in my shoulder, and all around me people were trapped by pieces of debris, but somehow everybody was still alive.”

The next thing she remembers is being in the school clinic where one of the teachers removed the glass. “They tore up curtains to clean our wounds as best they could. Then my father arrived. He put me on his back and we walked home together.”



In this photo released by the US Air Force, a column of smoke rises 20,000 feet over Hiroshima, western Japan, after an atomic bomb was released by US forces on August 6, 1945 [File: George R Caron/US Air Force via AP]

Michiko is a “hibakusha” or “bomb-affected person” – a survivor of the nuclear bombs dropped by the United States on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The hibakusha, including the descendants of those who experienced the bombings, today number about 540,000.

Nearly nine decades since those horrific events, Nihon Hidankyo, the organisation representing hibakusha, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on October 11, 2024 “for its efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons and for demonstrating through witness testimony that nuclear weapons must never be used again”, in the words of the Nobel Foundation.

Nihon Hidankyo was established in 1956 to raise public awareness across the world by showcasing, through the experiences of hibakusha, the apparent long-term effects of nuclear weapons. These include leukaemia, cancer and psychological trauma which, according to Nihon Hidankyo, have affected second and even third generations.

The Radiation Effects Research Foundation (a research institute jointly funded by the governments of Japan and the US) continues to collect data up to this very day – but has yet to acknowledge any unusual health effect upon the offspring or grandchildren of atomic bomb survivors. It remains a highly complex scientific topic, with numerous academic studies coming to different conclusions.

Michiko stands with Nihon Hidankyo’s version of events, and no story illustrates this more vividly than her own. Cheerful, friendly and optimistic, Michiko is neatly dressed and diminutive, with an elegant short hairstyle – an energetic member of Nihon Hidankyo even in her eighties. Her conversation is frequently punctuated by soft laughter, as she finds moments of humour even when relating her darkest hours.

Michiko with her mother and younger brother before the atomic bombing of their home city, Hiroshima [Courtesy of Michiko Kodama]

‘I cannot forget the scenes I witnessed’

Michiko was born near Hiroshima in 1938, the eldest child of a well-to-do family in the publishing business. As the Second World War dragged on, with US forces advancing across the Pacific towards Japan, she and her family lived in the Hiroshima suburb of Takasu.

While towns and cities across Japan were being carpet-bombed, Hiroshima and Nagasaki remained pristine up to August 6 – but only because the US was planning to measure the precise damage of a nuclear weapon in those cities, a fact openly revealed by Manhattan Project director Leslie Groves in his 1962 book, Now it Can be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project.

As Michiko was carried home by her father just hours after the bombing, the things she saw were imprinted in her memory for the rest of her life.

“Even after 79 years I cannot forget the scenes I witnessed: a terribly burned mother cradling the charred remains of her baby; people without eyes, crawling around aimlessly; others staggering along, holding their intestines in their hands.”

Later on, Michiko learned that her neighbourhood of Takasu – located about 3.5km (2 miles) from the hypocentre (directly beneath the bomb) – had experienced the heaviest downfall of nuclear-contaminated “black rain”: a toxic mix of ash, water and radioactive waste. Nihon Hidankyo later contended that the black rain caused diseases such as anaemia and leukaemia. The organisation achieved a victory in 2021 when the Hiroshima High Court ruled that people exposed to the black rain outside the boundaries of the area directly hit by the bomb should also be officially classified as hibakusha as they had experienced similar health problems.

Michiko explains how the tight family unit that remains a common feature of Japanese society was the only means of survival for so many in the aftermath of the nuclear bombing. Her family house was only partially destroyed and became a haven for dozens of injured and homeless relatives.

“A number of our relatives began to arrive, escaping from the worst-hit areas,” she recalls. “Many of them were severely injured, with their skin and flesh peeled off.”

With electricity, gas and running water all cut off, and no access to medical supplies, the family struggled to make do. “But we did have a well in our back yard, and were able to use that fresh spring water to clean the wounds and quench the thirst of the wounded,” Michiko says.

Mercifully, none of her immediate family – her parents, her younger brother Hidenori and her younger sister Yukiko – were killed or even badly injured in the attack, but in the following days and weeks she saw terribly wounded relatives passing away one by one, including a favourite girl cousin, aged 14, who died in Michiko’s arms from her severe burns.

Michiko as a young child at her family’s home in Hiroshima, Japan, before the atomic bomb was launched by the US in 1945 [Courtesy of Michiko Kodama]

Life went on, however. Within a week, Hiroshima began to return to some semblance of normality. Some rail lines remained intact, allowing trains to wind their way through the blackened remnants of the city. Vendors set up shop again in their ruined premises.

Meanwhile, Nagasaki was bombed on August 9. It is impossible to know the true number of casualties as a direct result of the nuclear attacks, because there was no census in wartime Japan. The US military estimated 70,000 had been killed in Hiroshima (from a population of about 255,000) and 40,000 in Nagasaki (from some 195,000); however, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, a US nonprofit group founded by Albert Einstein, which advocates against nuclear weapons, estimates the numbers were closer to 140,000 in Hiroshima and 70,000 in Nagasaki. The total population of Japan in 1945 was about 71 million.

Michiko as an older girl in the years following the nuclear disaster caused by a US atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945 [Courtesy of Michiko Kodama]

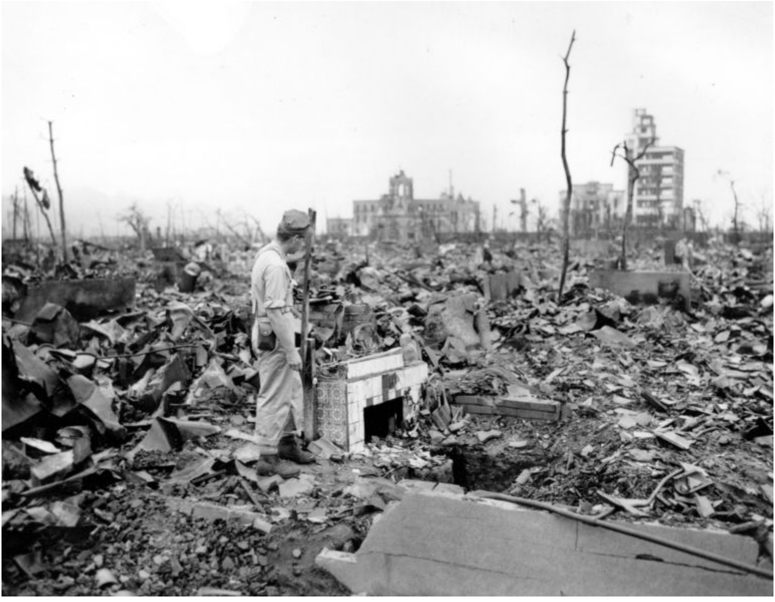
Roasting grasshoppers to survive

On August 15, Emperor Hirohito made a radio broadcast announcing the unconditional surrender of Japan, bringing to an end 15 years of war, first with China and then the western Allies.

“It took quite a long time until our life began to feel stable again,” Michiko says. “Having been relatively wealthy, it was now difficult for my parents even to secure enough food to eat. My little brother Hidenori and I would go out to catch grasshoppers which we’d roast in a pan – that might sound cruel but it was a source of protein. We would also go to a nearby river to catch shellfish,” she recalls.

Michiko’s mother had been pregnant at the time of the atomic bombing. Her youngest brother was born a few months later but he died shortly afterwards – almost certainly due to radiation poisoning, Michiko contends.

Some 120,000 hibakusha died of burn and radiation injuries in the aftermath of the attacks, according to Nihon Hidankyo. So-called “radiation sickness” included symptoms such as internal haemorrhaging, vomiting, inflammation of the mouth and throat, diarrhoea and high fever.



A man stands next to a tiled fireplace where a house once stood in Hiroshima, Japan, on September 7, 1945. The vast ruin was caused by the uranium atomic bomb detonated on August 6 by the US, leading to the end of World War II [Stanley Troutman/AP]

The government of Japan, focused on rebuilding efforts, had little time or money for victims of the atomic bombings, and with most hospitals in Hiroshima and Nagasaki destroyed and many doctors and nurses dead or injured, there was sparse medical care available for the hibakusha. That fell to the Red Cross which opened the Hiroshima Atomic-bomb Hospital in 1956 to provide medical services to those suffering from the aftereffects of radiation exposure. The Japanese government only began expanding specific healthcare for hibakusha in the 1980s.

From 1945 to 1952, the US occupied Japan and the American authorities were curious about the physical ailments of the hibakusha.

“I remember the US Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission (ABCC) would sometimes send a jeep to our house to collect my father,” Michiko says. He had not been badly injured in the attack but suffered from increasing weakness and fatigue.

“He had to go to the ABCC – it was an order,” she explains. “They carried out many examinations, then they’d give him bread and milk to take home to his children, and for that reason he cooperated.”

Michiko says she shares the general distrust of the ABCC that became prevalent among the hibakusha – one that still runs strong today. She believes the data they collected was for analysis in the US – not for the welfare of the Japanese people.

“The detonation of uranium and plutonium bombs were themselves an experiment,” she says. “The ABCC then came to Japan to scientifically measure their human effects.”

Survivors of the explosion of the atom bomb at Hiroshima in 1945 suffering the effects of radiation. ICRC photograph [Photo by Universal History Archive/Getty Images]

‘We cannot allow your blood to mix with our family’s’

Those effects sometimes took years or even decades to manifest and were a cause of discrimination and a source of humiliation for the hibakusha, even at the hands of their fellow Japanese citizens.

There was a fear that the hibakusha had invisible and contagious diseases, which made it difficult for them to find work in other parts of Japan, or even to get married.

In the years following the nuclear attack, Michiko and her family worked on rebuilding their lives. Her father made an unsuccessful attempt to restart the family publishing business, and eventually became the editor of a children’s magazine. Her mother, whose aristocratic samurai upbringing had equipped her with the skill of making kimonos and performing traditional Japanese dances, knew little about housework and had to adjust. She traded her remaining kimonos for vegetables to feed her family, and when the kimonos ran out, she began making and selling them.

Due to financial pressures, Michiko could not attend university and was forced to look for work. She found a clerical job and soon formed a relationship with a young colleague who had lost his father in the war. His family lived outside Hiroshima, away from areas affected by radiation.

One day, the young man asked Michiko to come home to meet his mother. This meant only one thing.

“When we arrived, we found a whole lot of relatives there. One elder uncle said: ‘I heard from my nephew that he wants to marry you, therefore we researched your family – and there is no problem with your roots. But we heard that you are a hibakusha. So we cannot allow your blood to be mixed with our family’s.’”

It was a devastating blow but one Michiko says she can understand. “I felt sad at the time – after all, I had done nothing to deserve this. It was not my fault that a nuclear bomb was dropped. But I too had read the news stories about stillborn babies, and miscarriages, and children with disabilities, all due to the atomic bomb – and my boyfriend’s relatives understandably did not want anything like that to happen within their own family.”

The Genbaku Dome – originally the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall – was the only building left standing in this part of Hiroshima. It still stands today in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park [Shutterstock]

Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in June 2024 [Shutterstock]

A poisonous thread through their lives

Despite the associated shame, Michiko eventually married her husband, Makoto, whom she had met through a mutual friend. He too was from another part of Hiroshima Prefecture which was unaffected by the nuclear attack. While his family opposed the marriage, again on account of her being a hibakusha, he insisted on going ahead. After their wedding, his work took them to the southeast Tokyo suburb of Chiba, where they settled into the typically middle-class life of a Japanese “salaryman”.

“Every night we would discuss whether or not we should have children, considering the risks involved,” Michiko says.

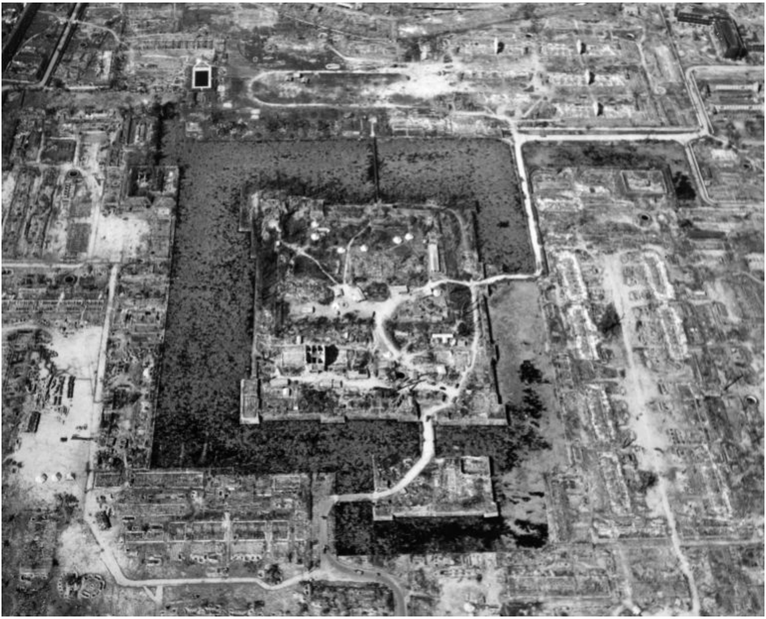
Finally, the couple decided that the birth of a child “would represent a new life for all my loved ones who had been killed”. They had two daughters – Mami and Akiko. “They were both healthy and cheerful and neither suffered any serious illness as they were growing up.”

In the background, Japan was rebuilding itself at an unbelievably rapid pace, becoming a global industrial powerhouse within two decades. But in Michiko’s eyes, the long-term effects of the bombs continued to weave a poisonous thread through her family’s lives.

“My daughter Akiko married a boy called Makoto,” Michiko says. “He was working at a foreign-owned company, so they went to live in various other countries. On one visit back to Japan, Akiko had a medical check-up. She was told she could have cancer, which after some examinations turned out to be true.”

The family endured an agonising wait for news as Akiko underwent a 13-hour surgery. After she returned from the hospital, it seemed she would survive. But on February 7, 2011, Akiko suddenly died at the age of 35.

“I still feel that she is with me – but that half of myself has been taken away,” Michiko says.



An aerial view of the total destruction of Hiroshima, the result of the US atomic bomb – the first dropped in wartime – on August 6, 1945 [US Air Force/AP]

Michiko believes that Akiko’s death was due to genetic mutations caused by the atomic bomb, as well as the cancer that took away her mother and younger brothers Hidenori and Yasunori (who was born in 1947), both in their 60s. Of Michiko’s siblings, only her younger sister Yukiko remains alive.

Younger hibakusha demand a comprehensive official investigation into this issue, along with compensation for what they claim to have suffered along with their parents and grandparents. This presents a challenge, given the conclusions of the Radiation Effects Research Foundation, which took over from the ABCC in 1975.

Two lawsuits filed by second-generation hibakusha were dismissed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 2023, with both courts refusing to accept the genetic effects of the nuclear bombings on succeeding generations.

Michiko and her fellow hibakusha say that the world has learned little from the catastrophic events of 1945 and the ongoing repercussions. Today’s thermonuclear missiles are many times more powerful than those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and an increasing number of countries aspire to join the “nuclear club”.

This does not deter Michiko, who continues to work with Nihon Hidankyo in its quest to draw attention to the uniquely destructive effects of atomic weapons.

“From an early age I learned about the dignity of life, and the fear of mortality,” she says. “My experiences have made me a stronger person. I exert whatever power I have to communicate the truth about nuclear weapons to younger generations, and this is an urgent message, because I too could die tomorrow.”

The experiences of Michiko Kodama and her fellow hibakusha stand as a warning to humanity, she says, conveying their urgent message that the world must be rid of atomic weapons, and indeed of war itself.