

# Hiroshima's Camera

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When my mother and I visited our homeland of Japan, our experience in Hiroshima taught me an invaluable lesson. In our image-soaked world, there is no substitute for the real thing. For travelers, now more than ever, picture-taking assumes a nearly religious duty. And while our photos serve good purpose, they can never capture the unique, lived experience of real, human encounters. Yet, we've so taken the image for granted that we occasionally need a sort of personal crisis to take us back to what really matters. For me, our Hiroshima adventure was that crisis, reminding me that the genuine warmth, thoughtfulness, and empathy of its citizens will outlast any photo, any image.

## Memorial Peace Park and Museum

These thoughts did not cross my mind that bright, January 1996 morning as *Okasan* (Mother) and I took a taxi to Hiroshima's Memorial Peace Park. Our driver was good-natured and courteous. Possessing a strong forehead complementing his round convivial face, he looked like my former karate *sensei* (teacher). We engaged in pleasant conversation with him. *Okasan* later recalled his last words as we exited the taxi—'Make sure you take everything with you.' The ride was short and we soon arrived at the Peace Park's Memorial Cenotaph.

Moments after disembarking from the cab, I sensed something missing from my waist—my leather pouch containing my camera. Forgotten in the back seat of the cab! A sinking feeling flooded over me as I recalled precious photos of Uncle Fujiya, Aunt Shizuka, my first cousins, those last happy and sad hours at Fujiya and Fumiko's home, Fujiya's insistence that I photograph him in his den in front of his favorite hanging scroll, and the panoramic views from Fukuoka Tower. These were some highlights of our stay in our shared birthplace of Fukuoka, my long-awaited, dream-come-true homecoming after over 40 years. Fukuoka was where my mother, Misae Kimura, fell in love with Irish-American GI, Tom Brannigan, stationed there just after the Korean War, and where we lived for 4 years before moving to Newport, Rhode Island. *Okasan* had long dreamed of 'bringing me back home.' Now, the prospect of losing those photos hit me like lightning, and for a few seconds my heart

stopped. Because photos of my dear family were all in the missing camera, there was little solace in the 8 rolls of film I had taken prior to the Peace Park.

Our driver was gone. Another, waiting for his next fare, sensed our anxiety and generously wrote down for us *his* own company's phone number, which we called (no mobile phones then) from a nearby phone booth. Since we did not know the name of *our* driver's company, the voice on the other end indicated that without that company name, it would be virtually impossible to track the camera down. At the same time, I wondered how trustworthy our driver's next passengers would be, probably tourists, once they discovered my camera in the back seat.

Of all places to lose my camera—Hiroshima! Having suffered unimaginably, the city represents a moral imperative to Never Forget. And now I'd lost the one device to preserve its memory.



The Cenotaph at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park  
(Hiroshima Prefecture)

The Museum and Park unobtrusively imposes a presence upon visitors, compelling them to linger for a while in humanity's most painfully profound experience. Okasan and I were not just observing some past event. It was more like stepping onto a dark frozen pond, the intersection of past, present, and future, and the freezing of history in which time stood still, literally incarnated by someone's wristwatch on display, paralyzed at 08:15 on that fated morning of 6 August 1945. In that instant, the future was annulled for Hiroshima's citizens.

The Museum whispered to me—'Forget the camera.' There is nothing more fertile than the imagination. Envision thousands of red and white lanterns gently placed on the Otagawa River by Hiroshima's citizens who gather there annually. These lanterns float silently downstream to commemorate all who have died from the disaster. No photo could ever capture this ritual's essence about which we Americans might ask, 'How can such reverence come from bitter agony?' Herein lies the true meaning of Hiroshima: the summit of human dignity rises from the ashes of human misery. This is why Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe eloquently describes Hiroshima's genuine spirit as embodied in its citizens, those who manifest human dignity amidst absolute desperation and desolation, whom he describes as 'astonishingly patient.' Unquestionably, we can claim the same for the countless victims of the March 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami and its aftermath. Again, words fail, as do images.

## Nahoko

Upon returning to Granvia Hotel, the reality of the missing camera also returned to awareness. We explained our plight to the hotel clerks, all of whom showed genuine concern. Retracing our steps earlier that day, I hoped that I might have

inadvertently left the camera somewhere else. At the train station where we caught the cab, I searched desperately for nearly 2 hours for the round, friendly face of our driver amidst a sea of cabs lined up in orderly rows. Even on the next morning of our departure I repeated this same ritual, again without luck.

Checking out that next morning, I met a different clerk at the front desk. Nahoko Yamada spoke English fairly well and, like the others, showed genuine empathy. When I requested names of all the area's taxi companies so that we could make calls ourselves, she saw the frustration on my face. Nahoko smiled caringly. 'I am sorry, but there are over 20 taxi companies here in Hiroshima.' Still, she called a central number. No luck. She kindheartedly assured me that she would continue to try. We exchanged business cards, and I gave her phone numbers where we could be reached in Osaka—at the home of my cousin Sachiko, Sumiko's daughter, or at the Nagai Park Hotel.

As soon as we checked into the hotel, I received an unexpected call from Hiroshima. It was Nahoko, whom I doubted would follow up quickly, if at all. Reassuringly, she explained that she called the various cab companies with no success. She then notified the central police office which in turn considered my missing camera enough of a problem to contact the local *koban*, or police boxes, situated throughout most major cities in Japan. Auspiciously, one *koban* reported that a small camera had recently been turned in by a taxi



My father and mother in Fukuoka, 1948

(Author)



My mother in 1947, Fukuoka

(Author)

driver! Nahoko continued, 'However, they will not release it to me without proper identification. Can you give me some description?' I could only recall sketchy details; the camera was a small black Canon inside a black leather waist pouch with zippers in both front and back, the front zipper empty. And the film inside the camera was near shot 23 of 24 exposures. That was the best I could do, and entrusted Nahoko to pursue the matter further.

Those last days were filled with sad goodbyes. Okasan felt this would be her last visit to Japan, and we spent a final, heartwarming evening with cousins Sachiko and Keiko, near Kansai Airport. Sachiko prepared an exquisite Japanese bath for me, and Keiko later sent me her own hand-woven tapestry. Their genuine kindness characterized the steady sincerity and warmth shown to us throughout our stay. Okasan and Sumiko never met again. Sumiko died some years later, and my mother passed away in December 2009. I believe a part of Okasan rests content knowing that finally, after all those years, she brought me back home.

## Back in Pittsburgh, Forever in Hiroshima

As for culture shock, I encountered it when we landed at LA; the palpable chaos was an abrupt shift from Kansai's cleanliness and efficiency. At LA, Okasan and I went our separate ways. She took her flight to Atlanta, which would eventually take her to sunny, warm Florida, and I arrived in Pittsburgh in the midst of the winter's worst snowstorm.

That same night, Nahoko's fax arrived from Hiroshima. After she contacted the koban, all she needed was a signed power of attorney, a copy of which was included with her fax. I promptly signed it and faxed it back to her. Next morning, I called Granvia Hotel. The clerk at the front desk, expecting my call, informed me that Nahoko was on holiday. But the camera was on its way to Pittsburgh! Nahoko took time and energy to visit the koban, hand them my signed form, procure the camera, and securely and pleasingly gift-wrap and mail it to me *before* her holiday.

Within a week, the 8 rolls of film prior to Hiroshima were developed. My wife, Brooke, and I held our ceremonial showing in our living room. The first batch of pictures, taken of colleagues at Tokyo University, was clear and sharp. However, when it came to the next roll, and the next, and all the rest, I grew numb. All seven rolls were blurry, very blurry, so badly blurred they were barely recognizable. Just as at Hiroshima Memorial Peace Park, my heart sank a few fathoms.

Perhaps processing caused the blurriness? Upon checking the negatives, we discovered that they too were out-of-focus so that the photos' obscurity could not be repaired. Brooke heard my heart crashing. The film inside the camera en route from Hiroshima would most likely meet the same fate. For days afterwards, I lingered in a cloud of

dismay. I had always dreamed of returning to my homeland and reuniting with my family, and the opportunity came during my University of Tokyo Fellowship. Yet, what did I have to show for it?

Hiroshima's camera arrived a few days later with a gracious, thoughtfully written letter from Nahoko. With her special interest in forensics, Brooke conducted an autopsy on the camera and soon detected the probable cause of failure. I had accidentally shifted the ASA speed from its original position by moving the camera in and out of the tight-fitting pouch.

After all is said and done, even though this roll of film suffered a similar fate, actually *because* of this entire experience, the memories my camera attempted to capture are in reality etched more deeply within me. For all its benefits, the photo also has its drawbacks. One significant downside is that it permits me to relax my memory of our experience. Without a picture, however, my recall is more deliberate, a blessing in disguise because it compels me to remember in a deeper and more profound way.

I am now linked to Hiroshima for life, but not through a collection of photos. For tourists obsessed with collecting photo-trophies of their visits, the photo is solid evidence that they've 'been there, done that.' My lifelong connection to Hiroshima instead lies through ordinary human encounters, without fanfare, culminating in the silent energy and patience of people in that renewed city. Nahoko, our smiling cabbie, the hotel clerks, koban police, my dear friends in Tokyo and Kyoto, and our beloved Japanese family all embody for me the genuine meaning of Hiroshima—persistent goodwill and composure in a storm. Their strength of character is unpretentious, and their dignity will always rise from the ashes. ■



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