Coping with Chaos

Human losses in both cities were staggering. Government officials, military and police personnel, hospital and medical professionals were mostly among the victims, and thus unable to help others. Through the two cities’ debris-filled streets streamed near-naked, bleeding and burned survivors seeking relief and rest. Surviving doctors and nurses (no more than 10% of pre-bombing totals) set up make-shift relief stations, but bedding, essential medical supplies, and trained personnel were in desperately short supply.

Indeed, there were hopelessly few to rescue. The biggest immediate task was the recovery and disposal of tens of thousands of corpses. Those who had died immediately were buried under rubble; those who had survived minutes or even hours were piled deep on bridges and along river banks, or just left to float down the rubble-ridden rivers. Later, corpses were piled high for burning. Flocks of scavenging crows accentuated the eerie scene.
*Hand-drawn scenes of corpse disposal in Hiroshima (HIMAT)
I threw myself into a frantic search for my family, casting about in the still-hot rubble. Before long, the tips of my shoes were burned so that my toes stuck out, and my hands became swollen with blisters. Looking along the road, near a neighbor’s house, I found a charred copse that seemed to be my wife. The dead baby on her back I took to be our one-year-old daughter Takako. However, I never was able to find our eight-year-old son Tateki, or our elder daughter Makiko.—Tsuneo Tomimatsu, Nagasaki.

Earlier in the morning, before the bombings, families had dispersed as fathers went to work places, children left for school, and mothers remained at home or went shopping while a grandparent stayed at home. Now, survivors still able to walk searched frantically for family members among the disfigured or dead in the smoldering ruins. Few recognizable buildings remained, and records for identifying and finding persons in schools, offices, hospitals, and so on were now only ashes. And few public servants survived to help. Family contact and cohesion, not just buildings, were woefully shattered.

Second only to the massive loss of human lives and the crippling internal and external injuries was the near-total loss of social institutions needed to succor and restore the people’s lives. Hospitals, schools, transport facilities, police and fire departments, water and sewage agencies, and not least, reliable news agencies, were all destroyed, their employees dead or dispersed.

*Policeman writing “casualty certificates” for victims at a Hiroshima streetcar stop about 2 p.m. on August 6. (HPMM)*

As citizens gradually recovered, they naturally began thinking of how to avoid such a horrible fate ever happening again, to anyone. This concern fueled personal efforts to record individual testimonies of the bombings, and on a larger public level, a fervent desire to develop means for peace education at home and on a global scale.

I thought she was dead, but finally found he alive. I hoped that she could at least die at home, so I borrowed a cart from a neighbor to take her home to Kuba. I had brought her up since she was two years old, after her
father died. I took her to the Red Cross Hospital. She was so pitiful, burned on the left side of her body, face and arm. I still cry to think of it.—Mrs. Kohide Matsuda, Hiroshima