He was an American child in Hiroshima the day the bomb fell

Gup, Ted . Gup, Ted.

FULL TEXT

On that clear, sunny morning, 7-year-old Howard Kakita stood on the roof of his grandparents' bathhouse excitedly watching the vapor trails of an approaching B-29.

The date was August 6, 1945. The city was Hiroshima.

Howard was not supposed to be on the roof, his grandmother shouting as the air raid siren sounded. Then again, neither he nor his brother were supposed to be in Japan at all. Born in California, they were Americans, like their mother and father before them, like unknown numbers of U.S. citizens who were caught in that city on that day and forever after associated with the atomic bomb and the horrors it unleashed.

A dozen servicemen, crew members of aircraft downed in the final days of the war and held as prisoners, died after the bomb detonated. But hundreds, some say thousands, of other Americans also perished or suffered and bore witness. Many were children from Hawaii and the West Coast who had arrived in the prewar years to visit relatives or absorb the culture of their families' heritage. Now, 75 years later, their numbers are dwindling. Even the youngest are in their 80s.

While no records reveal the exact number of American hibakusha - Japanese for "atomic bomb survivors" - that country's government made a lifetime commitment to serve them, dispatching teams of doctors to the United States every other year to track their health. For decades, these doctors have met with survivors, collected blood, measured vitals, taken X-rays and interviewed them about what ails them, be it the lingering effects of radiation or the complications of aging.

Forty Americans made themselves available to the doctors last November. Among them: Howard Kakita, a retired computer engineer, father and grandfather.

"There are not too many of us left," he says softly.

His story, like that of many American A-bomb survivors, is seldom part of the popular literature surrounding Hiroshima. Yet it is distinctly both a Japanese and American tale, one filled with tragedy, betrayal, heroism and eventual forgiveness.

Howard's story begins with his grandfather, Yaozo, a farmer and the first of his family to come to America. He was 22 when he boarded a transport ship in 1899, knowing no English but sure that the ticket he held was a ticket to a land of opportunity.

What awaited him was something different - anti-Japanese hysteria, a law that barred him from naturalization, and years of hardship. He retreated to Hiroshima but was unable to shake the American Dream.

In 1906 he came again, joined by his young bride. They settled in Bakersfield, Calif., where eight children would be born, each an American citizen, the birthright conferred by the 14th Amendment. Desperate for acceptance, Yaozo registered for the 1918 draft as "Charlie" Kakita.

Still, life in the States was no easier the second time around; the law prohibited Japanese immigrants from owning land or holding long-term leases. In 1927, Yaozo's wife died in childbirth. He returned to Hiroshima and remarried, only to watch each of his sons choose a future in America over one in Japan. By 1940, he had sunk into a deep depression and turned to drink. He seemed close to dying.

Early that year, son Frank, the second-oldest, and his wife, Tomiko, sailed to Hiroshima to introduce Yaozo to his two

grandsons and stay for the birth of their next child. The months-long visit was the perfect tonic; the patriarch recovered his health. But when Frank announced that the family needed to go home to California, Yaozo's mood again darkened. So Frank and Tomiko made him and his wife an offer: As a show of good faith that they would return, they would leave 2-year-old Howard and 4-year-old Kenny in their care.

Then Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, and everything changed. War - and its cruel aftermath - would separate them for nearly all of the decade.

Only as a young man did Howard begin to realize how miraculous his survival was. His grandparents lived less than a mile from Hiroshima's ground zero. For several moments, he lay unconscious under the rubble, then dug himself out. His grandfather rescued his grandmother from the mountain of debris that had been their house.

They fled with his brother toward the mountains, away from the all-consuming fires, passing bodies with entrails exposed. For years, Howard could not eat foods with flecks of pink or red, be it grapefruit or beef. The sight of spaghetti turned his stomach.

"It reminded me of blood and gore," he recalls now.

When they came back to their obliterated neighborhood, the air was filled with the stench of mass cremations. They and those around them salvaged whatever metal and wood they could find to put a roof over their heads. Both Howard and Kenny suffered dysentery and lost their hair from the radiation exposure. Their maternal grandmother, they learned, had literally vanished in the blast. Their maternal grandfather would die within days. The couple, sweet-potato farmers, had just been in the city for the weekday market.

On the other side of the Pacific, their parents assumed both boys perished. Like some 120,000 Japanese Americans, Frank and Tomiko had spent the last three years in an internment camp. Theirs was a desert landscape in Arizona so hostile that guard towers were unnecessary. And that's where they still were when the American Red Cross finally confirmed that their children were alive.

But the end of the war brought no reunion. The Kakitas were released from the camp, handed a one-way ticket and $25. But they had no money to pay for Howard's and Kenny's passage from Japan. More months became years. On Aug. 8, 1947, grandfather Yaozo died of cancer - "a casualty of the bomb," Howard says.

The following March, against their will, the boys were placed on a ship to San Francisco - a foreign land with a foreign language, two parents they did not remember and two little brothers they did not know.

Their reentry was fraught. The family lived in a three-story tenement. The parents did not speak of their internment; the sons did not speak of the bomb. Howard, now 9, was beset by nightmares and woke up screaming.

Years would pass before "the fog lifted," and he could discuss Hiroshima publicly. Kenny remains intensely private about sharing the past. "I can't talk about it," he told Howard recently. "I get too emotional."

Howard's evolution from silent survivor to reticent witness to full-throated chronicler of the atomic bomb's catastrophic toll reflects the narrative arc of any number of American hibakusha, who recognize the time to tell their story is growing short.

"I do feel a responsibility," he explains from his home in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif., where, at 82, he is busy preparing a webinar with other survivors to mark the upcoming anniversary. "I am at that twilight zone where I am one of the youngest guys who remember the experience of the Hiroshima bombing, and after me, there is probably no one else. Those younger will not remember."

Last fall, he spoke to hundreds of history students at his alma mater, the University of California at Los Angeles. He has shared his story at the Japanese American National Museum, and Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Museum has videotaped him as part of its collection of survivors' memories.

Part of his bigger narrative is what his life became in this country. While his transition was turbulent at first, the trauma receded and he soon flourished - as a Boy Scout, math whiz, high school track star and varsity football player. He studied engineering at UCLA and got a master's degree in computer architecture.

In 1960, as a graduate student, he met a freshman named Irene Doiwchi. She was a Japanese American born in the Amache, Colo., internment camp. Her father had volunteered for the legendary all-Japanese American 442nd Infantry Regiment, which was awarded more than a dozen Medals of Honor. Suiyo Doiwchi earned four Bronze Stars and

helped liberate the Dachau concentration camp in Germany - his way "of proving his loyalty to the United States," according to his daughter.

Not until Howard was considering marriage did he bring up Hiroshima with Irene. "I had to tell her that I was exposed to serious radiation, that I may not live that long," he says.

Irene was undeterred. "Call it blind faith or something," she says. "I told myself I was meant to be with this man, come hell or high water, no matter what comes along."

For a time, that past seemed a distant memory. Howard was designing early computers, first for aerospace companies, then Xerox. But the shadow of Hiroshima descended once more when their 4-year-old son Randy was diagnosed with cancer in 1968. He died in less than six months.

"Was it my fault?" Howard wondered, again fearing the legacy of his exposure. (Two daughters and four grandchildren have had no such scares.)

The Kakitas long ago reconciled themselves to history, just as Japan and the United States attempted to do the same. In 1988, the U.S. government pledged $20,000 in reparations to every Japanese American forced into a camp; about 82,000 survivors ultimately received payments. Japan continues to wire monthly payments to American survivors based on their proximity to the bomb - Howard gets about 30,000 yen, or $300 - as well as send the medical teams for those biennial health assessments.

"We are the living guinea pigs," he says, with the exams providing doctors and researchers insights into the long-term effects of radiation.

Last September, Howard and Irene visited Hiroshima and its peace museum. It was either his fourth or fifth trip back, and he noted that the exhibitions had become less graphic and less likely to shock visitors. Yet his own sense of purpose has only intensified.

"There is a Japanese phrase - 'shikata ga nai,' which means 'it cannot be helped,' " he says, and this fatalism is how many Japanese came to terms with tragedy and misfortune. He now disagrees. "It is not something that cannot be helped," he stresses. "We should learn from it, we should understand."

- From Retropolis, a blog about the past, rediscovered, at washingtonpost.com/*retropolis*

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