



## THE LAST OF THE *HIBAKUSHA*

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**K**eiko Ogura stands before the assembled mass, her gaze greeting the audience with a calming warmth that belies the horrors her eyes have witnessed. She tucks an unruly strand of straight gray-black hair behind her ear and adjusts her rimless spectacles before beginning her address. English is not her first language, but she speaks with a slow, deliberate cadence that gives her a powerful aura amongst the gathered crowd. Her words echo throughout the auditorium, each one allowing the last just enough time to land, as though the weight of what they convey is too heavy for her not to give each its due. She isn't supposed to be here, after all.

Ogura was eight years old on August 6, 1945, the date that will forever be remembered as the day the United States altered the future of nuclear discourse by dropping an atomic bomb on her hometown of Hiroshima. All told, roughly 200,000 people—most of whom were civilians—perished as a result of the bombing (Yamazaki). The Ogura family—including Keiko, her younger siblings, and her parents—managed to defy astronomical odds and survive the greatest show of military force the world has seen.

Survivors of the Hiroshima bombing, along with those who lived through the

bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, have been dubbed *hibakusha*—literally, “those who were bombed.” The UCLA Asian American Studies Center estimates that there are approximately 225,000 officially certified *hibakusha* living in Japan, though that number is beginning to dwindle as the survivors age and eventually die (Yamazaki). Ogura, not blind to that fact, delivers her message with pressing resolve.

Throughout the latter part of her life, Ogura has served as the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation’s official English-language storyteller, an appointment that calls for her to relate the story of the bombing to audiences around the world. It is a mission that she fulfills with grace, dignity, and a solemn caution: *Never again*.

That message has now brought Ogura to a midsize lecture hall on the campus of Syracuse University, nearly 7,000 miles from her native Japan. She will spend the week giving a series of lectures that detail her experience as a survivor and advocate for nuclear nonproliferation. She wastes little time before delving into the stirring, yet understandably horrific, details of the bombing.

“All of a sudden there was a flash. The flash was tremendously white. All of a sudden everything turned to white. I couldn’t see any color. I was beaten to the ground; at the same time, the blackness came on me and I became unconscious.”

That the Ogura clan was safely stationed in an underground bunker when the bomb fell was the result of a provident premonition felt by Keiko’s father. “All of a sudden my father said, ‘Keiko, you shouldn’t go to school today,’” recalls Ogura. When his daughter protested, the elder Ogura replied,

“Today something might happen. I have a bad feeling.”

Any endeavor to attribute this foreboding to some act of divine intervention would be ill-conceived: no God was present on August 6th in Hiroshima. “There were rivers of dead bodies,” says Ogura. “They completely burned the bodies. They wanted to kill themselves, they were so hopeless.”

Understanding the impact of an atomic bomb is akin to wrapping one’s head around the size and distance from Earth to a celestial body; the scale is so immense that everyday units of measurement are rendered altogether useless.

Erika Gregory, a nuclear-reform advocate, explains that a nuclear weapon the size of a small latte would have the power to annihilate a city the size of San Francisco (Gregory). As terrifying as even that thought may be, nuclear weapons are, in actuality, much larger and much more powerful than Gregory’s “nuclear latte.”

In fact, the scope of devastation of which nuclear weapons are capable has increased at an alarming rate since 1945. According to Alexandra Bell, a senior policy director for the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, the bombs used in the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki would now qualify merely as small-scale weapons in comparison to the larger, more destructive weapons that have been developed over the past half-century.

“The bombs used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were both under 20 kilotons,” Bell said in a recent interview with NPR. “Twenty and under is what we consider a low-yield nuclear weapon. So it’s smaller than a lot of the weapons we have in our arsenal. But it is



still a city destroyer” (Bell).

As frightening as it may be in theory, a weapon of this magnitude could drastically alter the future of humanity as a whole if implemented in conflict. This is a commonly accepted reality, albeit one that has long masqueraded as an abstract, distant threat.

The world is currently in what scholars refer to as the “Second Nuclear Age,” a period that began after the conclusion of the Cold War and the prolific arms race that accompanied that conflict, commonly referred to as the “First Nuclear Age” (Morgan).

The current state of nuclear affairs is marked by widespread nuclear proliferation by a variety of countries, nine of which have been definitively proven to possess nuclear arsenals (Davenport and Reif). Of those nine nations, only five have signed the United Nations’ Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), an agreement

reached by 191 countries in 1968 that calls for gradual disarmament of nuclear arsenals to prevent an all-out nuclear war (United Nations).

Worldwide, there are approximately 15,000 nuclear warheads, 9,600 of which were in military service as of 2017 (Davenport and Reif). Despite the fact that over 90% of these weapons belong to the United States and Russia, another party has recently caused global consternation by ramping up its nuclear efforts.

North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003, bringing the number of signees down to 190 and initiating a period of rapid nuclear development in the Communist nation. While the details of North Korea’s nuclear stockpile are unknown and difficult to verify, some recent estimates postulate that the nation has somewhere between 15 and 20 currently operational nuclear weapons, with the

capacity to expand its arsenal to nearly 100 warheads by 2020 (Davenport and Reif).

This is a concerning reality, especially considering U.S. President Donald Trump's publically volatile relationship with North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un. North Korea recently announced that its nuclear testing program was on hiatus, though the length and legitimacy of this lull is somewhat unclear. The tenuous relationship between the U.S. and North Korea has raised considerable international alarm and was specifically mentioned by Keiko Ogura during her address.

"We repeat such a silly history again," Ogura said of the discourse between Trump and the North Korean leader. "A single bomb and thousands of nuclear weapons are the same. We cannot use single bomb to destroy everything. We pray that President Trump shouldn't react so quickly. He should wait."

Ogura's mission to elucidate the realities of nuclear warfare and warn against their future utilization is a powerful one, and if there is any hope for the avoidance of a future nuclear war, her warning must be heeded soon. People with her vital perspective will not be around to offer it much longer: Ogura recently turned 80, and the average age of living *Hibakusha* is approximately 75 (Yamazaki).

In the Syracuse University auditorium, speaking for over an hour, Ogura gives a rousing performance. The audience stands and applauds, and after the crowd has dispersed, I approach to ask a few follow-up questions for the coverage. In an interpersonal setting, Ogura is even more warm and affable than she was on the stage. Her

response to my last question about the future of nuclear proliferation has such an impact that I feel no need to transcribe it; her words echo in my subconscious long after she speaks them: "We shall not repeat this evil. We are all human beings, regardless of borders. Nobody should have that experience."

### Works Cited

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