

# WAR AND PEACE

A Traveler's Impressions, 2005

by Monica Haven

**War.** I headed for Hiroshima as though on a pilgrimage. My trek began many years ago in Oak Ridge, TN and took me via Los Alamos, NM to its inevitable and climactic conclusion in Japan, following an historic route from silent secrecy to apocalyptic crescendo.

Under the auspices of the Manhattan District Corps of Engineers, a sleepy valley was transformed into a bustling hub for the mass production of fissionable material. But by the time I visited Oak Ridge, the trailers, dormitories, and hutments that once housed a population which reached 75,000 at its peak, were mostly gone. The extensive infrastructure had faded away, leaving behind a quaint rural area that offered a self-guided driving tour amidst fields and forests.

The frenetic war-time research activity atop a remote desert mesa near Albuquerque has also calmed. Today, a museum describes the extraordinary assemblage of genius, dedicated to their science, which thrived within this intellectual environment and ultimately helped to bring mankind to its precipice in the guise of peace.

Paralleling times past, I traveled to Pearl Harbor and stood above the rusting hull of U.S.S. Arizona. A uniquely American venue, this floating memorial attracts a host of international tourists. I stood amidst a group of Germans who were unaware of my linguistic abilities and disparagingly commented that "Americans had no right to retaliate the way they did." People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones! Although I was appalled by their tactless criticisms and compelled to patriotically defend my country's actions, I simply could not do so.

And then, I was finally at Ground Zero. A short streetcar-ride from my *ryokan* [inn], I hopped out, crossed the street, and looked skyward into radiant sunshine. Today, majestic elms frame the fragile remains of the Genbaku Dome, which stands only a few feet from the Aioi Bridge, the intended strategic target.

Little Boy was dropped at 8:15 AM on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Moments later, 130,000 civilians were incinerated. A vibrant city ceased to exist. Green turned to gray. Life turned to death. And the Enola Gay made a graceful arc and headed home, accompanied by two chase planes responsible for aerial reconnaissance.

Mission accomplished.

*...And... The telephone was ringing. I picked up the receiver.*

*"It seems Hiroshima has been hit. What's the situation?"*

*"I have no idea what happened, but the whole city is destroyed."*

*"The whole city is destroyed? What kind of ridiculous story is that?" [Michiko Saitou.]*

*From behind me came what I thought was like a sudden burst of lightening. In that very instant the clothes on my back began to burn. Then, with a terrible deafening roar came*

*the atomic shock wave that blew everything in the vicinity twisting up into the air.*  
[Unknown.]

What hath we wrought in the name of peace?!

Standing beneath the skeletal remains of the sole surviving building in Hiroshima, I was overwhelmed by collective guilt that had weighed upon my shoulders since Oak Ridge, where I had begun my trek along the path of atomic development. The summer sun shone brilliantly upon the brick rubble and twisted rods of iron. Colorful paper cranes were scattered everywhere in memory of 10-year old Sadako Sasaki who folded 1000 of them before she succumbed to leukemia.

This ruin was no more or less impressive than those which so liberally dotted the post-World War II landscape 30 and 40 years after the Allies had carpet-bombed Central Europe. I grew up surrounded by those scars and learned early on that war is ugly with after-effects that are long-lasting and all-pervasive. But I understood that American strafing missions—however deadly—were a show of comparable force: Plane for plane, B-17 for Messerschmitt, bomb for bomb.

In contrast, America's response to Japan's aggression was grotesquely disproportionate and cruelly inhumane. To justify this colossal brutality, Americans declared then—and still maintain today—that the Bomb helped bring a bloody war to a speedy conclusion and ultimately saved more lives than those taken in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It's an easy argument to make since the world was never given the chance to find out otherwise.

**Peace.** Standing at Ground Zero in Hiroshima, shouldering a nation's remorse, I was apprehensive that I would come upon the children and grandchildren of those who had survived the nuclear hell we had unleashed. I expected anger, recriminations, and deep-rooted hatred of an enemy that had obliterated two cities.

I at least deserved a cold shoulder. Yet, I was greeted by unequalled graciousness and welcomed as a beloved guest. Embraced by strangers and adopted by innkeepers, my encounters were unfailingly affable with not even a hint of reserve or insincerity.

Our violent acts were not forgotten [how could they be?], but we as a people have been forgiven. I live within a community of immigrant Jews that fled Nazi persecution and am accustomed to the refrain, "Never forget." Sadly, this adage is accompanied by a silent decree that absolution has not been and will not be forthcoming. I know many who have dedicated their lives to hatred, promising never again to set foot upon soil desecrated by Jewish blood. While I don't condone this permanent conveyance of guilt, I would not have been surprised if my Japanese hosts had harbored similar sentiments and yet I encountered nothing but an all-consuming pre-occupation with peace and harmony.

Frustrated by a defective camera that precluded candid shots, I failed in my surreptitious attempts to capture kimono-clad beauties, meditating monks, and deferentially-bowing Shinkansen conductors. Instead, as I struggled to adjust my lens, my intended subjects cooperatively assembled, , smiled broadly, and always held out their fingers to flash the peace sign just in time for me to snap my photo.

Peace is so endemic that even the youngest, most photogenic subjects formed the “V.” These two-year olds surely did not comprehend “peace” but merely mimicked their elders at every opportunity. And while it is but a superficial symbol, this desire for world peace is so deep-rooted that young and old alike believe that no greater goal exists.

Paradoxically, our once seemingly disingenuous justification for our atomic act of aggression which brought World War II to its close has been given relevance by the gentle ethos of our former enemy. Sixty years ago America dropped the Bomb in the name of peace; today Japan upholds the calm with resolve.