

We're All Responsible for the Bomb

As a child in Holland during the war I hated the Japanese. Then I met the enemy face to face: Two young girls who survived Hiroshima.

by JAN VAN STOLK

Today, I'll be remembering Hiroshima.

Many of my friends with children will take them to a remembrance celebration down by a water's edge where they'll make Japanese paper lanterns and set them afloat on the water, their candles glowing in the dusk. As they watch them drift they'll remember.

Why?

Why do we want to remember something as awful as dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima 57 years ago?

Let me tell you a story.

I was a boy of nearly 14. It was the summer of 1939 in Holland. I was walking on the Coolsingel, one of the main streets in Rotterdam. I saw big, black headlines in the papers: WAR. And I got this horrible, overwhelming feeling in my heart, a kind of awful guilt feeling that I had something to do with it. Family and friends were eager to point out that to feel like that was pretty crazy. Surely, the war had nothing to do with me but rather with Mr. Hitler or Mr. Chamberlain or Versailles. A few months later, in May 1940, the Coolsingel, the street I had been walking on, was smashed to smithereens when the bombs dropped on Rotterdam. The town burned for 6 months.

The Germans behaved badly. At first, it was easy to hate them. We had a special hateful word for them. *Moffe*, or even better, *Rot Moffe*, which meant "awful, putrid, filthy Nazis." Since one got shot for almost anything, I'm sure if a German soldier had heard you call him a *Rot-Mof*, that would have been the end of you.

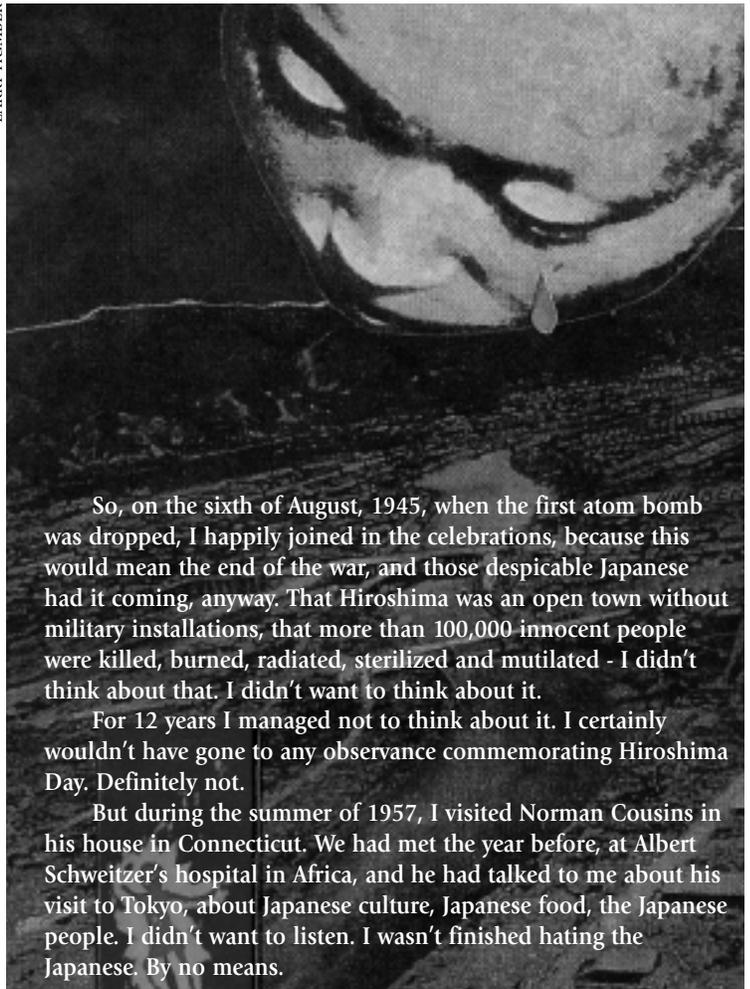
German soldiers were all over and they looked rather pathetic. One day on a streetcar there was a German soldier all bandaged up on crutches with his arm in a sling and a bandage on his head; a little five year old girl spontaneously left the seat next to her mother, walked over to the soldier and started stroking his good arm, saying softly: "You poor, poor *Rot-Mof*."

It seems it becomes more difficult to hate when there is some contact.

However, I had never seen a Japanese person. When Japan entered the war, it became easy to transfer all my "hating" to the Japanese. They, after all, had overrun and occupied the Dutch East Indies and put many of my compatriots in concentration camps to languish and die.

Yes, it was self-satisfying to hate the Japanese. I became quite good at it, although I did have a temporary setback when, in my late teens, I had a lovely erotic dream about a Japanese man and a Japanese woman making love. The dream of Japanese people loving and my hate didn't seem to mix too well. But I managed to get over that one and solidly continued my hating.

LARRY HUNBER



So, on the sixth of August, 1945, when the first atom bomb was dropped, I happily joined in the celebrations, because this would mean the end of the war, and those despicable Japanese had it coming, anyway. That Hiroshima was an open town without military installations, that more than 100,000 innocent people were killed, burned, radiated, sterilized and mutilated - I didn't think about that. I didn't want to think about it.

For 12 years I managed not to think about it. I certainly wouldn't have gone to any observance commemorating Hiroshima Day. Definitely not.

But during the summer of 1957, I visited Norman Cousins in his house in Connecticut. We had met the year before, at Albert Schweitzer's hospital in Africa, and he had talked to me about his visit to Tokyo, about Japanese culture, Japanese food, the Japanese people. I didn't want to listen. I wasn't finished hating the Japanese. By no means.

Norman had arranged for 12 young women, victims from the Hiroshima bombing, to come to the United States. Now, inside his house, he introduced me to two of them. He introduced me as Dr. Jan, his friend. "Mitsu this is Dr. Jan. Aya...Dr. Jan..."

I'm dumbfounded. Two human-beings, two young women. They were four and five when the Bomb dropped. They look like monsters and I'm supposed to examine them. Mitsu has no ear-lobes left, her face is a mass of scars, her eyes are constantly watering, her nose is two holes, her hands are claws. Aya's back is a patch work of ... I don't know what. Her mouth is pulled to one side by the big scars on her face. Her hands and fingers are also contracted and look like claws. Most of her head is bald. One ear-lobe is gone too. Even as little children they must have protected their bellies, because both of them are relatively unscarred. We know, and they know, that they will never conceive. They both have had 12 plastic-surgery operations and are here in the United States to have more.

I don't quite know what happened next. I became upset. I had that awful, horrible feeling again, the one I had had in 1939. Something must have shown on my face, because Mitsu reached out, and with her claw-like hand she stroked me and said, "It isn't your fault."

Was Mitsu right? Maybe it isn't our fault. But isn't it our responsibility? As *The Power of Now* author Eckhart Tolle said: "Don't we belong to this human race, this species, which has managed to kill, in one century, nearly 150 million of its own."

Thank you for remembering.

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