Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes

Sadako Sasaki is only two years old when the atomic bomb drops on Hiroshima. Sadako, her brother and their mother and father survive the atomic blast without any apparent ill effects until, just one month before her twelfth birthday, Sadako is diagnosed with leukemia. In Japan, after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many people contracted leukemia and other cancers and diseases caused by the radioactive fallout.

Sadako's friend tells her of a Japanese legend which holds that folding a thousand paper cranes will bring good fortune -- any wish will come true if you fold a thousand of them. Sadako believes this and, from her hospital bed, she begins folding her thousand paper cranes so that she might become well again.

She uses any scraps of paper she can find, gently smoothing them into neat squares and folding them into paper cranes. Many are made from candy wrappers and medicine wrappers. Some of the cranes are so small that she has to use a needle to fold them.

When Sadako dies almost a year later on October 25th, 1955, she has folded 644 paper cranes. She had refused to give up hope. Inspired by her courage and strength, Sadako's friends and classmates fold the remaining 356 cranes before she is buried.

On May 5, 1958, the Monument to the Children of the Atomic Bomb is dedicated in the Hiroshima Peace Park. Standing atop the monument is a life-sized likeness of Sadako Sasaki, arms raised skyward holding a large stylized crane. Poised at the sides of the monument are the flying figures of a boy and a girl. Carved in black granite are the words of a junior high school student from Hiroshima,

"This is our cry, this is our prayer: peace in the world."

Each year, millions of paper cranes arrive in Hiroshima from people throughout Japan and around the world. The cranes are placed beneath Sadako's statue in memory of Hiroshima, an expression of hope for a peaceful world.

Today, Sadako's folded paper crane has become a symbol of peace and hope to those who are committed to ending the threat of nuclear war.

* The children's book Sadako, written by Eleanor Coerr and Ed Young and published by Putnam & Grosset provides a longer version of this story.