Ground Zero, Nagasaki: Stories

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Abstract: *Nagasaki was the second city to experience a nuclear attack at the end of WWII, seventy years ago. As we approach this anniversary, Paul Warham's translation of Seirai Yuichi's novel presents a fascinating window on the world view of the Catholic community, who were concentrated around Ground Zero in Nagasaki, in the locality of Urakami. Narratives such as that of the Christian minority divulge a lesser known history of Nagasaki. Here, we read of atomic memory touched by the themes of guilt, persecution and also resurrection.*

Keywords: *Nagasaki, Ground Zero, Catholicism, atomic memory, 70th anniversary, nuclear bomb, World War II, hidden Christians, persecution, resurrection.*

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima is commemorated in the famous Peace Dome (now a world heritage monument), and in a widely repeated Japanese narrative of Hiroshima, as *hibakusha*, innocent victims of a bombing. The bombing of Hiroshima is also central to debates about Japan's—and America's—war guilt, and the process by which the war in the Pacific ended. In contrast, little attention has been directed at Nagasaki, the second victim of a devastating nuclear attack. As we traverse the 70th anniversary of the end of the war, how do the people of Nagasaki remember this traumatic event? The translation of Yuichi Seirai's book is a timely one at this juncture, offering a new perspective on atomic memory.

Yuichi Seirai, a non-catholic whose real name is Nakamura Akitoshi, was born in Nagasaki in 1958, the year the Urakami Cathedral was finally rebuilt. He went to Shiroyama Elementary school, just west of 'Ground Zero', and later served as director of the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum. He was encouraged to write imaginatively about the bombings by Hayashi Kyōko, famous author and atomic survivor of Nagasaki. These short stories, translated with aplomb by Paul Warham, immerse the reader in the world

view of the Christian populace who were decimated in 1945 when 8,000 out of 12,500 were said to have been killed in the bombing.[1]

Yuichi Seirai's novel *Nagasaki, Ground Zero: Stories*, is a fictional collection of short stories, centering on protagonists around Ground Zero, Urakami. By introducing a more personal element, this book effectively familiarises the reader with a post-bomb Catholic narrative. The Urakami Catholics described by Seirai are a diverse lot – they are definably Japanese and Catholic, but also Nagasaki citizens. These characters often have lucid memories of the bombing, albeit remembered through the lens of a marginalised community. Seirai's fictional characters are congruent with my own current research amongst the Urakami community (Figure 1), some of whom are Catholic and also *hibakusha kataribe* (spokespeople of A-bomb victims). Seirai apprises the Urakami narrative, and provides clues, although not necessarily direct answers, to the historical narrative around the end of the war.

Figure 1: Matsuo Sachiko, Catholic survivor and interviewee, 2014, Photo, the Author.

[1] Yūichi Seirai, *Ground Zero, Nagasaki: Stories*, translated by Paul Warham (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Seirai's work spawned a movie in 2013, '*Bakushin: Nagasaki no Sora'* or 'Under the Nagasaki Sky'.

Remembering Nagasaki rightly

In 1945, the region of Urakami and the city of Nagasaki delineated the populace into distinct social groups who were entirely unevenly impacted by the atomic devastation. Five percent of the inhabitants of Nagasaki were Christian (mostly found in the Urakami region) at the time of the bombing and yet they represented over ten percent of those killed by the bomb and a large proportion of *hibakusha* survivors. The Catholics from Urakami Ground Zero bore the brunt of the central force of the bombing. The 'Fat Man' bomb deployed over Nagasaki was of much greater force, equivalent to approximately 22 tons of TNT, than the approximately 13 tons of the 'Little Boy' bomb dropped on Hiroshima.[2] Descendants of the *Sempuku Kirishitan*, or 'Underground Crypto-Christians', who had returned to Catholicism following Japan's abolition of the anti-Christian edict in the early Meiji period, were amongst those who lost the most upon the scorched earth around Urakami, on August 9th, 1945.

Bombing as Persecution: the Catholic lens

Seirai's intimate knowledge of the local situation is evident in *Nagasaki, Ground Zero* and he illustrates well the omnipresent memories of the bombing for the Christian *hibakusha*, who swiftly theologised their nuclear memory, splicing it with a Christian narrative of faith, as Seirai's story "Nails" demonstrates:

> O-Ryo-san had come back to the family home after the house she had married into in Yamazato was destroyed in the atomic bombing. It was in this cottage that she had recuperated alone… O-Ryo-san had a faded scar on her cheek. I remember her standing under the persimmon tree gazing out at the remains of the ruined cathedral… We would hold our hands, tingling from the cold, over the hibachi and nibble on the dried flesh of the fruit, bursting with sweetness, as O-Ryo-san told us stories of long ago. Stories of distant ancestors who had gone, praying, to their deaths, burned alive at the stake; or of the narrow cages in which the faithful were imprisoned when whole families were forcefully removed to Yamaguchi in the final days of prohibition… O-Ryo-san told us how the ancestors had hidden an image of the Virgin and Child in this cottage and how they had prayed here in secret during the years when our religion was outlawed.[3]

[2] Yuko Matsunari and Nao Yoshimoto, "Comparison of Rescue and Relief Activities Within 72 Hours of the Atomic Bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki." *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 28, no. 06 (2013), 538.
[3] Seirai, *Ground Zero*, 6-7.

Even as their narrative is influenced by their faith, Seirai's protagonists' memories of the past divulge integration into the wider context of the Japanese war-effort. Christians perceiving their participation in war with ambivalence was apparent not only in World War II, but in still older conflicts dating to the days when mercenaries were recruited in some numbers from amongst the Christian populace of Nagasaki. Christian complicity in the wider context of the Japanese Shinto divine war setting is recalled in another of Seirai's stories. In Seirai's short story, "Insects", one Christian says to another, "I knew that he had been with the Special Attack Forces in Chiran and had received his orders for a final mission… I asked him once if he had really been ready to be enshrined with all the other war dead at Yasukuni, but he didn't reply."[4]

GUILT TURNED INWARD

The second last story in Seirai's collection, entitled "Shells", underscores themes of guilt and grace. The impact of trauma on family and community bubbles under the surface in this story, in which a father is driven to despair over his young daughter's premature death. He meets a neighbour, called Nagai (like the famous doctor), whose Catholic *hibakusha* sister had spent time with his daughter, and finds that his daughter and the neighbour's sister died on the same day, one day after that year's anniversary of the nuclear bombing. The woman who had looked after his daughter had suffered massive trauma in the bombing when she was a child of seven years. Nagai's sister had urged their mother to flee for safety from the family home as fire encroached, even though her siblings were trapped inside, still screaming for help. For Nagai's sister, the trauma of the bomb halted time: "For her, the bomb fell over and over again until the day she died."[5] Only forgetfulness helped this woman resist the trauma. She lived her life with a 'blank' in her head, a protective forgetfulness against the memories that threatened to envelop her again. "She said it was like something had gone numb inside her brain."[6]

Alongside this remembering and forgetting, an apocryphal tale told by her Grandmother, who had sadly perished in the bombing, acted for Nagai's sister as hope or even exoneration. In this inherited story, the Christians in the neighbourhood set fire to their own houses to warn the other villagers of an approaching tsunami. As a child, Nagai's sister cannot fathom what is good in this story, which results in their houses burning down. So her grandmother creates an addendum and declares that the house fires were extinguished by the coming of a wave, and left behind a debris of shells. For this

[4] Ibid., 57. For further reference to Christian participation in Japanese war, see the diary of Hayashi Ichizō, Christian *tokkōtai* pilot, in Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze Diaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 163-183.
[5] Yūichi, *Ground Zero*, 148.
[6] Ibid. 144.

survivor, shells and a rising tide become symbolic of a graceful end to the alternative unbearable torment of fire and loss.

This tale of Seirai reminds the reader of wider themes of Japanese and US war guilt. The intertwining of the memories of the bombing with Christian heritage and interpretations connotes a powerful distinctiveness for the atomic memory of Nagasaki. The woman's self-blame for the death of family members reflects what John W. Treat has described as the Urakami Christian community's tendency to passivity or to internalise blame for the bombing of Nagasaki.[7] Certainly, the blame game started immediately after the bombing of Nagasaki. Some survivors found a tendency to blame the self almost impossible to avoid. Citizens of Nagasaki suggested that the bomb was dropped on Urakami rather than Nagasaki, as "punishment for worship of the foreign god."[8] As well as the simple poignancy of the story, Seirai's tale delivers an Urakami narrative of exoneration from blame in the wider context of Nagasaki.

Furthermore, the Catholics called the devastation of the bomb the *go-ban kuzure*, or fifth persecution, and remembered well the so-called fourth persecution of their community, from the 1860s until 1873, when many of their sacred objects were confiscated.[9] Seirai's stories reveal deeper layers in Nagasaki's history, recalling the Cathedral ruins (Figure 2) but also the rebuilt Cathedral, as a part of a longer struggle to assert an identity of faith as resistance and endurance. Urakami Cathedral is mentioned several times by Seirai in Ground Zero, as a part of the natural landscape and holy places of the Catholic believers.

THE URAKAMI CHRISTIAN HIBAKUSHA

In this newly translated book, Seirai looks to Urakami for resurrection and new life and for promises from a lost history. The faith of the Christians, to some degree unbroken since Nagasaki was a 'Christian' town in the late sixteenth century, offers an alternative complexion to nuclear memory. Chronologies such as those of the Christian minority found here are worthy of ongoing consideration in history, as well as other forgotten and minority groups of Nagasaki, such as the displaced *buraku*.[10]

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[7] John Whittier Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 306.
[8] Ibid., 305.
[9] Kamata, *"Nagasaki no inori to ikari,"* in *Nihon no Genbaku bungaku*, 15 (1983):413. See also *Kirisitan Objects, Christian Relics in Japan 16-19th Century / Illustrated Catalogue of Tokyo National Museum* (Tokyo: Tokyo Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, 2001).
[10] Buraku Kaihō Dōmei. Chūō Honbu, *Shashin Kiroku Zenkoku Suiheisha / Buraku Kaihō Dōmei Chūō Honbu Hen* (Ōsaka-shi: Kaihō Shuppansha, 2002), 119: "Nagasaki ken buraku shi kenkyusho, Furusato wa isshun ni kieta."

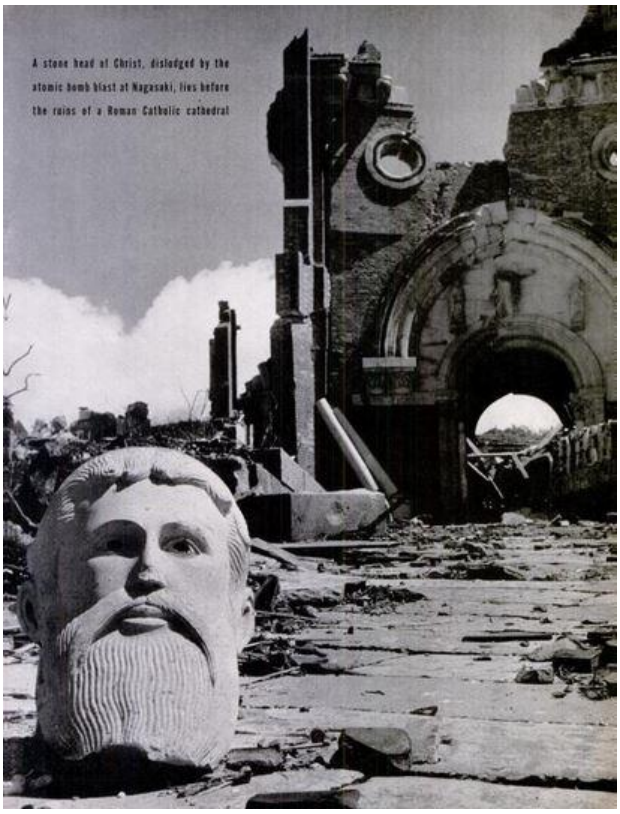

Figure 2: The ruins of Urakami Cathedral 1945, as depicted in Life Magazine, Public Domain.

In the final of Seirai's stories, a survivor who was an infant at the time of the bomb, is picked up by a kind woman; he is never able to find trace of his family. As this child becomes an adult, it is almost as though he is born of the nuclear bomb – everything else is a blank. His foster father one day takes him to Urakami, imagining where he came from, shortly after the 1959 completion of the Cathedral building:

> … Suddenly, the cathedral soared upward from behind the one-story wooden houses on the corner. I'd seen the new building on television, but the grainy impression on the black and white screen had not prepared me for the beauty and vigor of the new stone against a blue sky. My heart rose with it…A white crucifix hung above the altar. My foster father eventually caught up and stood by my side. 'That might be your god up there,' he whispered… I felt I had finally found my own Urakami.[11]

[11] Seirai, *Ground Zero*, 170.

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