

(reprinted with permission from *New Scientist*, 21 August 1975)

Hiroshima pilgrimage

Hiroshima lost another one the night we arrived. As we made our way towards the hypocentre, the point which had been directly beneath "Little Boy" when it exploded 30 years ago, we were met by a streaming crowd of people - young couples, teenagers, elderly males, families with children, all advancing on us, wave after wave, their faces impossible to fathom. Soon we saw what we had been seeking, the skeletal ruins of the shattered Industry Promotion Exhibit Hall, better known as the A-Bomb Dome. Its floodlit gauntness was outlined in greenish white against the night sky - directly across the avenue from the Hiroshima Carp baseball stadium, from which the avalanche of people poured. The Carp had just been defeated, 3-1, by the Taiyo Whales. We watched the youngsters, all sporting vermilion baseball caps with the insignia "C" - not, of course, a Japanese character - trotting along the pavement with their elders. Then we crossed the street to the Dome, shaking our heads. When we left four days later we were no closer to reconciling the surrealist incongruities of Hiroshima +30.

Like most people in the West I first heard the name Hiroshima in August 1945, when I was a small boy at my grandparents' home in rural Manitoba. In the months that followed I read all I could find about this amazing discovery, "atomic energy". The popular awe it inspired, the aura of impressive mystery about it, must have been instrumental in my later decision to major in nuclear physics at university. But what fascinated me was the science and the technology - not their consequences. It did not become clear to me until much later that, at 8:15 am 6 August, 1945, "atomic energy" had killed 200 000 people. The connection between the science and the slaughter was somehow academic, devoid of reality. In due course, as I began collecting popular books on "atomic energy", I acquired a copy of the first Penguin edition of John Hersey's Pulitzer prize-winning book *Hiroshima*. But I didn't read it. Hiroshima was just a name, a symbol for an event of unparalleled awfulness. I was willing to acknowledge the mythology and leave it at that. I did not want to know the details. I was pretty certain I would not be able to handle them.

This attitude persisted until the middle of 1974, when I began writing a book on nuclear power for Penguin. Within three months I found myself inextricably immersed in the world of nuclear weapons. In the mid-1970s, with so many nuclear weapons in so many hands - and by now apparently taken for granted by almost everyone - the thought of Hiroshima came to me with an obsessive resonance. Then, in June this year, one of the world's best-known and most venerable peace organisations, Gensuikin, the Japan Congress against A- and H-bombs, invited me to be their guest at the Thirtieth Atomic Disaster Anniversary World Conference Against A- and H-Bombs, to be held in Hiroshima. I was by no means sure that I wanted to know any more than I already did about the consequences of a nuclear explosion on a city: I accepted the invitation with mixed feelings.

At once the complications began to set in. In Japan I learned that my hosts, Gensuikin, were themselves a sort of fission product. The original organisation had been established in the mid-1950s, after the Castle Bravo H-bomb test on Bikini, with its tragic consequences for the Rongelap islanders and the crew of the Japanese fishing vessel *Lucky Dragon*. But by 1963 one faction, backed by the Socialist Party of Japan, was opposed to all nuclear weapons, no matter whose; another, backed by the Communist Party of Japan, was opposed to nuclear weapons in "capitalist" countries but not to those in "socialist" countries. The organisation split, the former faction under the banner of Gensuikin, the latter Gensuikyo, the Japan Council Against A- and H-Bombs. Gensuikyo now seems to espouse a policy difficult to distinguish from that of Gensuikin; yet another attempt was made in July of this year to bring the two organisations together for a joint conference, and for a united challenge to the worsening problem of nuclear armaments. But the attempt failed, for reasons that even the newspapers found impossible to understand. We foreign delegates simply had to accept the division. As a corollary it was clear that we would profoundly offend our hosts if we made any effort to follow the proceedings at the Gensuikyo conference, held in Hiroshima at the same time, attended by such luminaries as Philip Noel-Baker and Sean McBride, both winners of the Nobel peace prize. It also became apparent that our two-day conference would focus essentially on the drafting and adopting of resolutions - an exercise which at least two of us found frustratingly beside the point.

Dr Bjorn Gillberg, director of the Environment Centre in Sweden, reacted with similar restlessness to the format of the gathering. The evening of our arrival the two of us set out from our base, the Hiroshima Riverside Hotel (its neon sign shone over the water in English), to walk to the Peace Memorial Park. Our encounter with the baseball crowd was only one of a succession of dislocating episodes. We stood in silence, gazing up at the broken brickwork of the Dome - restored in 1967, by public subscription of \$140 000, after heated civic controversy whether or not it should be torn down, and the land built upon, like the rest of the gleaming steel and concrete city. A bat flitted through the floodlights. Behind us, next to the stone monolith with its Japanese inscription - this time no English - stood a shiny plastic litterbin in the shape of a penguin; the entire Dome enclave was guarded by these absurd creatures. Two young lovers embraced on a bench, facing the moonlit river, their backs to the Dome. Gillberg and I walked back to the hotel, pausing to drink a beer in a street-corner cafe, under a pin-up poster of a blonde from Gillberg's home town. The juke-box played "Those Were The Days".

Politics and survivors

The Gensuikin international conference opened on Sunday, 3 August, at the Hiroshima Labour Hall, attended by about 70 delegates - politicians, union officials, scientists, journalists, civil servants and representatives from environmental and peace organisations, including some two dozen from foreign countries. After speeches of greeting the meeting heard a series of brief reports from delegates about issues germane to the conference. The local spokesman for the League of Arab States led off by drawing attention to recent allegations about the nuclear weapons capability of Israel, and demanded that the conference condemn such a development. He and his Arab colleagues laid so much stress on this particular issue that the majority of the

conference debate ultimately revolved around it, to the detriment of other issues of at least equivalent importance.

Of more immediate concern to the Japanese, for instance, was the possibility that tension in the Korean peninsula would lead to renewed conflict there, in which - according to US Defense Secretary James Schlesinger - the use of nuclear weapons "could not be ruled out". Delegates from Okinawa and Micronesia described US military reorganisation after the withdrawal from Vietnam, including the re-establishment of a major nuclear weapons base on Tinian, from which the "Enola Gay" had taken off with "Little Boy" 30 years before. A delegate from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands put forward a proposal formulated at a conference in Fiji in the spring of 1975, for the creation of a nuclear-free zone in the Pacific - which would involve not only withdrawal of US and other military installations from the region, and a cessation of French nuclear testing in Polynesia, but also a complete ban on nuclear facilities and operations of any kind - including the civil. This proposal was subsequently endorsed by the Gensuikin conference, and a resolution passed to this effect.

One of the most impressive delegates at the conference was also probably the least obtrusive. He was Nelson Anjain, chief magistrate of Rongelap, in the Marshall Islands. In a quiet speech he recalled how the fall-out from the Castle Bravo test on 1 March, 1954, had inflicted serious radiation injury on many of his people. "All but one of the children on my island have had to have surgery to remove parts of their thyroid glands. One 21-year-old woman is in the US as I am speaking, undergoing surgery for the third time. In 1972 my nephew, Leko Anjain, died of leukaemia." He went on to read the text of a letter he had sent in July 1974, to the head of the US Atomic Energy Commission medical team, declaring that his people no longer wanted to serve as research subjects, but instead wanted genuine medical care, "from doctors who care about us". The letter concluded "Now that we know that there are other people in the world who are willing to help us, we no longer want you to come to Rongelap".

Delegates reported on the plight of other nuclear victims - not only the Japanese survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also the many thousands of Koreans, working as forced labour in those cities when the bombs fell. An estimated 20 000 such survivors still live in South Korea; but the Japanese government has never acknowledged their claim to compensation equivalent to that offered to native Japanese survivors. To be sure, as the native Japanese survivors - "hibakusha" - have long known, financial compensation still leaves many chronic problems. The hibakusha live under a stigma; Japanese society regards them as somehow unclean, crippled, second-class citizens. Employment is difficult to find, as are normal social relations. But the Gensuikin conference heard very little about the present circumstances of the survivors. Its final communique was terse, worthy, and couched in terms of such generality as to impose scarcely any onus on departing delegates.

Nonetheless one point of particular interest did emerge from the conference, and may well have some clearly identifiable consequences. As well as calling for a world-wide ban on nuclear armaments, the conference agreed that the symbiosis between military and civil nuclear technology required a similar ban on civil nuclear activities. In general terms, of course, such a conference decision would be devoid of import - but

for the fact that Gensuikin is supported both by the Socialist Party of Japan, a major party in the Diet, and by the General Council of Trades Unions of Japan.

Only a few days earlier, on 31 July, the Japanese cabinet had decided to raise the share of nuclear power in Japan's total energy consumption from 0.6 per cent in 1973 to 9.6 per cent in 1985, which would require at that time an operating capacity of 49 gigawatts. The present nuclear capacity is about 6.5 gigawatts, of which at the moment only about 1.5 gigawatts is actually in operation; the government proposal amounts to a crash programme by any criteria.

However, delegates at the Gensuikin conference included Dr Sadao Ichikawa of Kyoto University, and several other university scientists, who are organising a three-day meeting in Kyoto, 24-26 August, to develop a national campaign against the Japanese nuclear programme in favour of other options including solar energy - which was undeniably super-abundant during the Hiroshima conference.

For my part, it would have been unthinkable to leave Hiroshima without visiting the Peace Memorial Museum; I made my way there the moment the closing session of the conference concluded. The admission charge is trifling - 50 yen, when a newspaper costs 70. I found myself almost the only Occidental in the eddying crowd moving slowly past the exhibits. As you step into the first chamber your field of view is filled by a ceiling-high blow-up of a US Air Force photograph, with the official lettering in the lower right-hand corner: "Hiroshima (atomic) strike". The towering cloud, already drifting eastward, casts a black shadow behind it, over what an hour before had been the city of Hiroshima. In the middle of the chamber is a circular enclosure on the floor, perhaps five metres in diameter. Suspended from the ceiling, so that the scale height of 600 metres brings it to your eye level, is a red ball about the size of a billiard ball. Below it, inside the enclosure, is a scale model of Hiroshima after the blast - a wasteland of brownish grey dust, crisscrossed by straight lines where streets had been. Only a few concrete ruins are still standing, except towards the outskirts of the city. The green of the surrounding mountains gives stark emphasis to the lifeless aftermath where the city had been.

The generation gap

Set into the wall beyond the model city is a diorama: three figures, two women and a child, hideously injured, staggering towards you out of a background of raging flames. It is the only exhibit which is anything but matter-of-fact. From then on all the captions of photographs, all the recovered artefacts, twisted, charred, shattered, are labelled in Japanese and English with straightforward descriptions, whose lack of emphasis is itself both curiously dramatic and strangely unreal. The other visitors, thronging through the exhibits, included many children, almost all Japanese. What they made of it all I have no idea. For most of them it must have been much like a trip to Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors - vicariously scary, but essentially superficial. How would you tell your child about a nuclear attack? One that actually happened?

On the way out there is a visitors' book, specifically soliciting signatures from foreign visitors. I turned the pages, reading the remarks in the last column, headed: "Impressions"; "No more Hiroshimas"; "Never again"; "Peace"; and others - one

visitor from Leicestershire was moved to comment "English could be improved". I signed the book; but I left the last column blank. When I stepped out into the scorching sunlight of the Peace Memorial Park I found myself staring into the sky, at a point about 600 metres above the Dome - and the baseball park. My imagination was not up to it.

On the way to the airport we drove past the only part of Hiroshima which is not immaculately modern architecture. It is a riverbank slum, not far north of the Memorial Park, which is home to many of the city's remaining hibakusha. The rickety shacks, thrown together from scrap metal and old movie posters, were this time displaying a white cloth banner, facing the river, with scarlet lettering in Japanese. I was unable to find out what it said.

Since my return I have watched and listened to all the confident commentaries and pronouncements - about Japan and the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Korean negotiations, the Egyptian "nuclear council", the French-Iranian nuclear package, the Brazil-West Germany nuclear package, the Canada-Argentina nuclear package, the meaning of Hiroshima 30 years on. I asked my niece, a bright 13-year-old, if she had heard of Hiroshima. "No". As a *memento mori*, and to consummate the paradox, I brought my six-year-old daughter back a souvenir of my trip - a Hiroshima Carp baseball cap. She doesn't understand its significance, and I haven't tried to explain it. I'm by no means sure that I can.