

## The John Hersey Interview

By Rodney Barker

Author of *The Hiroshima Maidens*

COVID-19 has muted many of the commemorative initiatives planned for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, among them the annual reflection on the legacy of what happened in Hiroshima at 8:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945. As the virus forces other historic military tributes to either cancel or go online, a premium is being put on people coming forward with previously untold stories. With this in mind, I offer the memory of the afternoon of March 24, 19185, when I was interviewed by John Hersey, author of *Hiroshima*, a work that some have hailed as perhaps the most important book written in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

As one of the first American journalists to visit Hiroshima after the war and report on the unique devastation, Hersey traced the lives of six residents who survived the blast from the morning the bomb was dropped through the days, weeks and months that followed. What he wrote was a publishing tour de force, appearing first as a long article in *The New Yorker* that devoted the entire August 31, 1946 issue of the magazine to Hersey's powerful non-fiction account, and then as a bestselling book titled *Hiroshima* that is still in print today.

Then, in 1985, as a way of commemorating the upcoming 40th anniversary of the bombing, Hersey was asked by New Yorker managing editor William Shawn to return to Hiroshima and write a follow-up chapter reporting on what had become of his six characters in the years since. In the course of his research, Hersey learned that Viking Press was about to publish *The Hiroshima Maidens*, a book I had written about a project that brought 25 young Japanese women horribly disfigured with keloid scars from the heat of the atomic fireball, to America in the mid-fifties for reconstructive surgery. The leading figure in this effort from the Japanese side was one of the characters Hersey had profiled in his book, and Hersey contacted me as part of his active preparation for his follow-up. After several phone conversations, during which he posed questions that were clearly designed to determine how valuable a resource I might be, we arranged an in-person meeting at Hersey's winter home in Key West, Florida, a compound of palm-shaded cottages in Key West, Florida, that he shared with his friend and fellow writer Ralph Ellison, author of "The Invisible Man." A tall gentleman with thinning white hair and dark bushy eyebrows, there was a soft-spoken gentleness and graceful way about Hersey that made him easy to talk with. I think what also made the conversation flow so easily was Hersey's willingness to respond to questions as well as ask them, a quality that no doubt contributed to his success as a journalist.

In preparation for our meeting I had given considerable thought to questions about when Hersey, who as a war correspondent for *Time* and *Life* had reported from major theaters of combat around the world during World War II, first realized that the atomic bomb was something different. Hersey replied that he had seen cities around the world leveled to rubble, but it was when he stood in the middle of what was left of Hiroshima and, looking

around, saw that one bomb had turned an entire city into a cemetery in a matter of seconds, that the unprecedented terror that came with nuclear weapons struck him. “And I’ve never lost that sense of terror.”

This led to a follow-up question. I knew Hersey had written a lot about conventional warfare, and I wondered if writing about this new weapon, whose destructive power had the potential to threaten human life on the planet, imposed a language challenge to him. I wanted to know if the importance and urgency of the issues raised by the atomic bomb had imposed a burden on the prose he chose to use.

Hersey acknowledged that this was a tricky subject. “There is a danger in writing about these issues if you try to push language too far. A danger that the reader will become more conscious of the emotions of the author than the subject written about.” He went on to say, “If the devices of language and expression become central, then concrete experience becomes less so.” He fell back on the conviction that as a writer reporting on a tragedy of this magnitude, it was a mistake to focus on the large and overriding issues at the expense of personal and specific details. He felt that “the concrete is more valuable than the abstract, no matter how firmly based.” It was easier for the reader to relate to an individual than a population, in other words.

This said, he admitted that he didn’t have all the answers to this question, and that *Hiroshima* had been criticized by some reviewers “for not being passionate enough and not outraged enough. But the flat tone of that book was deliberate and I hold to the idea that if I had become more polemical or more passionate or more argumentative, that in trying to persuade people to take a view of the situation, then I think the reader would have been more conscious of me rather than the people I wrote about.”

We then talked about the mixed response to his book when it first came out. There were those who felt that the Japanese were the enemy, they had started and prosecuted a brutal war, they deserved the ending they got, and Hersey was criticized for having been too sympathetic in his characterization of them. It was felt by some that he was implicitly expressing guilt for America having dropped an atomic bomb on a civilian target.

To that, Hersey admitted this was the most difficult question he was asked: Was it right or wrong to drop the bomb?

His answer was that in an absolute sense he thought it was wrong. The outcome of the war was inevitable at that point and it was only a matter of time and the conditions before Japan surrendered. But he said he had compassion for those who made the decision because they were working with incomplete information. “Sinfully incomplete,” was the way he put it. His reluctance to categorically condemn the decision to use the bomb, however, came from the conviction that there would be more wars, the decision of whether or not to use nuclear weapons would have to be made again and again, and the knowledge and example of what happened at Hiroshima and at Nagasaki, and that worse would accompany any future use of nuclear weapons in warfare, was the most effective deterrent to their use again.

He added, "I have come to believe that there is an important connection to the way many Americans think about the nuclear weapons that have been used, and those in our arsenals that have not. And because I think that an unwillingness or inability to reassess and discuss the necessity and significance of the Hiroshima bombing is tied in a subtle psychological way to a lack of urgency in finding a way out of the nuclear weapons dilemma, for this reason I feel more thought must be given to finding new and creative ways of penetrating the resistance to, and expressing the contemporary relevance of Hiroshima."

It was at this point that Hersey referred to "the peacekeepers," a term that to him meant the A-bomb survivors themselves, and their stories. "The *hibakusha* (Japanese for Atomic bomb survivor) are the real reason why atomic bombs have not been used since 1945." Which brought us round to his book.

Hersey said the idea for the form of *Hiroshima* came from Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, a 1927 Pulitzer Prize winning novel that told the story of five different people who died in the collapse of an Inca rope bridge in Peru in the summer of 1714 from the point of view of a monk who witnesses the accident, and who goes about inquiring into the lives of the victims in search of some sort of cosmic answer to the question of why each had to die. Hersey said he wasn't looking for evidence of divine intervention in what happened in Hiroshima, but he was hoping to find a handful of people, even if they weren't representative the city's population or the survivors, whose paths had crossed. He said he had interviewed thirty to forty people, looking for those with "interlocking stories," before narrowing it down to six. "I suppose any six people, if you followed them through, would have had enough parallel drama in their experiences to make a story that would say something. Chance, as much as anything, determined the selection of the six I chose to work with."

The conversation then moved on to Rev. Tanimoto, a Methodist minister educated at Emory University in the United States before the war, and a man who figured prominently in both of our books. Hersey did not take notes but he listened raptly as I filled him in on the Reverend's tireless efforts to reconstruct his church out off the ashes of Hiroshima, and the successes and frustrations he experienced as a peace activist in post-war Japan, trying to raise money to help war widows and petition the government on behalf of other survivors, and to build a World Peace Center. All of which led to an invitation to "the A-Bomb Minister," as he was nicknamed, to come to America on several fundraising speaking tours during which collections were taken, which in Hiroshima created jealousies and resentment from those who felt that Tanimoto enjoyed the publicity and was promoting his church too much. No question, he was helpful to survivors, but his style was criticized as being too Western. He was willing to go out and promote his ideas in contrast to the Japanese way of getting things done through quiet persuasion.

Hersey chuckled richly and found a special delight from an anecdote I provided him about a fellow minister in America who owned an old Cadillac that was burning oil and

he was planning on getting rid of it, but Tanimoto said he'd take it and worked out a deal that resulted in it being shipped to Hiroshima, where he would meet foreign visitors at the train station and taxi them around the city that was still struggling to emerge from the ashes behind the wheel of this luxury American automobile.

"After hearing you talk, and from what I've found out so far, I think this will be a rather sad story I have to tell," Hersey said. "And Tanimoto will prove to be a vehicle for expressing the kind of complicated jealousies and anger that rose up around *hibakusha* in general in postwar Japan, amid the current of pro- and anti-American feelings associated with the end of the Occupation, the surge of nationalism, the breakdown of the peace movement, and the feeling by many that survivors were selling the bomb."

Hersey's follow-up, titled *The Aftermath*, appeared in *The New Yorker* on July 15, 1985, and would be added to all subsequent editions of *Hiroshima*.

It would be his last word on the subject. John Hersey passed away in 1993, at the age of 78, at his winter home in Key West, on March 24th, 1993, eight years to the day after we spoke.