

The John Hersey Interview

By Rodney Barker

Author of "The Hiroshima Maidens"

COVID-19 has muted many of the commemorative initiatives planned for the 75th anniversary of the end of World War Two, among them the annual reflection in Hiroshima on the legacy of what happened 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, 1985, when I was interviewed by John Hersey, author of *Hiroshima*, a work that some have hailed as one of the most important books written in the 20th century.

As one of the first American journalists to visit the A-bomb City after the war and report on the unique devastation, Hersey had traced the lives of six residents who survived the blast - two women, two doctors, two clergymen - from the morning the bomb was dropped through the days, weeks and months that followed. And 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. As a way of commemorating the upcoming 40th anniversary of the bombing, Hersey had been asked by 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 had learned that Viking Press was about to publish a book I had written that featured one of the characters he had profiled. Rev. Kiyoshi Tanimoto was a pastor at the Hiroshima Methodist Church, educated in theology at Emory University in Atlanta before the war, who, feeling guilty at having escaped injury, had made it his mission in life to get medical help for the innocent victims of the bombing and rebuild their shattered lives. Among the projects he had undertaken was providing assistance to young schoolgirls who had been outside on that fateful morning, and were looking up at the Enola Gay flying over the city when the bomb exploded. Their flesh seared by the atomic fireball, they had been left horribly disfigured with keloid scars, and Tanimoto had been successful in involving the American editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Norman Cousins, in their plight. In the mid-Fifties, 25 of the Hiroshima Maidens, as they were called, had been brought to America for reconstructive surgery at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City to repair their wounds, which was the subject of the book that I had written. The women had stayed in the homes of Quaker families in the surrounding metropolitan area while recovering from surgery, and two of them had stayed in my family's home.

Hersey first contacted me by mail, introducing himself and saying he was actively preparing for a return to Hiroshima, and asking if I would be willing to speak with him about Tanimoto. During a follow-up phone conversation, after he posed a number of questions that were clearly designed to determine how valuable a resource I might be to

him, we discussed how to arrange an in-person meeting. I asked him where he was currently located and he said he summered in Martha's Vineyard and wintered in Key West, which was where he was now. Recognizing this as a unique opportunity to have an in-depth one-on-one conversation with another author who had written a book about the experiences of atomic bomb survivors, as well as a series of other non-fiction books and novels that had earned him a Pulitzer Prize, I decided that a trip to see my mother in South Miami was overdue, and that I would extend it to include a visit with John Hersey in Key West.

We met at Windsor Place, a compound of cottages that Hersey said had been a wreck when he purchased it in 1976, but was now a bright and airy, palm-shaded tropical paradise with a swimming pool in the middle that he shared with his friend and fellow writer Ralph Ellison, author of "The Invisible Man." A tall and thin 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. And beneath a ceiling fan that stirred a sea breeze, with a glass coffee table between us that had arcing orchids on top and copies of *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books* on a lower shelf, and the strains of a woman singing a gospel song coming from somewhere, we spoke for several hours. I think what made the conversation flow so easily was Hersey's willingness to respond to questions as well as to ask them, a quality that no doubt contributed to his success as a journalist. There was also a humility in his manner that was expressed in his admission that he didn't have a good answer to some of my questions, in addition to his acceptance of the inherent complexity of many of the things we spoke about that was often complicated further by the human factor. Several times during the course of the conversation he said with a shrug, "That's the way people are."

First off, Hersey wanted to know how recently I had been to Hiroshima and how many times I'd been there. When I told him twice, the last time six months earlier, he said that he had been there just that one time when he had researched *Hiroshima*. A second visit while on a subsequent trip to Japan in 1958 had been scratched when news of his pending arrival generated an uncomfortable amount of media interest. "When I learned there were going to be about forty Japanese reporters and cameraman accompanying me..." He shook his head. "I didn't want to do it that way."

That led to a question from me about how, as a war correspondent for *Time* and *Life* who had reported from major theaters of combat elsewhere around the world during World War Two, surely he had witnessed the horrible price exacted by all-out war. When, exactly, had he realized that the atomic bomb was something different and unprecedented?

He said that when he heard President Harry Truman announce that an atomic bomb had been dropped on a Japanese city, "I knew warfare, and the world, was never going to be the same again." He said 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 realized that one bomb had turned an entire city into a cemetery in a matter of seconds, that the true terror of what a nuclear weapon could do struck him. "And I've never lost that sense of terror."

Then why, I was curious, had he not returned in forty years? Nor written about Hiroshima again?

“I’m torn about that,” he replied. “Life seemed to offer so many urgent things to think about and write about. I moved on from that and wrote about racism under the Nazis and the Holocaust, and the struggle of blacks in this country. There were other issues that in a way, not so much competed with the nuclear issue as complicated things. And they are real too. So I felt the need to write about them. I’ve also been leery about never wanting to repeat myself. On that account, I’ve not wanted to specialize, so to speak.”

Not only had Hersey not written again about Hiroshima, he said he had avoided writers who thought of him as the go-to-guy for a blurb recommending books critical of American nuclear policy. And he referenced a recent book by a well-known writer who had asked for an endorsement that he wasn’t willing to provide because it contained the claim that today’s nuclear weapons were a million times more powerful than Hiroshima’s bomb. That wasn’t true, and those kinds of distortions, he felt, not only damaged the credibility of the work, but typified some of the hyperbole surrounding the issue.

This led to a question I had given considerable thought to in preparation for our meeting. I knew Hersey had written a lot about conventional warfare, and I wondered if writing about a 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 led to the development of a modern conscience that imposed a burden on the prose he chose to use. “When you saw with your own eyes what happened to Hiroshima, when you’d become aware that the future of the world was at stake, did you feel an obligation to write about war in different terms?” I asked.

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 said he fell back on the conviction that as a writer reporting on a tragedy, 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. So he focused on “People who have had a direct experience of an event and who go through a variety of stages, some good, some painful, and not something that is seen as bigger than themselves.”

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."

After thinking about what he'd just said, Hersey seemed to realize he hadn't exactly answered my question. "I tend to agree there cannot be any adequate representation through words of what happened in Hiroshima, just as there cannot be any adequate representation of what happened at Auschwitz in the Holocaust. There is no way of telling the story that will represent the actuality of it. Facing that, my own belief has been that the best - the only thing you can do - is try and write in such a way that the reader identifies with and becomes part of the experience. Representing abstract ideas through human beings in action, I believe is the only way to reach the consciousness of the reader. So I try and remove myself as far as I can from the experience of the people I'm writing about, and let them be the ones with whom the reader makes a connection, without mediation. That doesn't mean I think the language should be dull or repellant. If it's possible to be eloquent while being concrete and dealing in pictures not ideas, and write in such a way that the reader identifies and becomes part of the experience, then I think that's best."

He went on to say "I wrote a novel about the Warsaw ghetto and in a way I used the same sort of tone I did with *Hiroshima*. I wrote that novel twice, actually. There's a seven hundred-page novel I discarded for a second version because the first version was told as if I knew everything and saw it from above. Then I realized that there had to be another kind of intermediary. Not me, but someone living the experience. So I came up with the idea of a diary by someone who had been through it all, and that way put myself one remove from the material. I don't know. I just believe that the greatest hope of getting people to think and act on what they read is to help them imagine. And I think the possibility of their imagining comes through seeing pictures rather than ideas."

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 back 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 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 build a World Peace Center in Hiroshima that would help war widows and petition the government on behalf of other survivors. 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 with about a fellow minister in America who had 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 in a luxury American automobile and taxi them around the city that was still struggling to recover. The fact that Tanimoto never came back with as much money as people thought he was raising left the impression that he had a secret bank account in the States where a fortune was being stashed.

Hersey was aware of the work Tanimoto had done on behalf of the Hiroshima Maidens, and knew that when he accompanied the women to America he had been the main subject on the popular TV show *This is Your Life*, hosted by Ralph Edwards. At the time, Hersey said he'd thought the show "tasteless because it seemed to me to exploit all the wrong things." But when I told him a backstory about the surprise appearance of Robert Lewis, co-pilot of the Enola Gay, who at the last minute decided he wanted to get paid and when his demand was refused he'd left the studio and gotten drunk, had to be talked into returning, and had been inebriated when he appeared on the show to make a donation on behalf of the crew, I could tell this was the kind of anecdote he was looking for, and would bring what he wrote alive.

"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."

I then asked Hersey if he intended to write the additional chapter similarly to how he wrote the previous chapters, or if having the perspective of 40 years behind him was going to change the way he wrote. To which he replied that he wasn't thinking of the follow-up as another book. It was going to be "tight and sketchy" and he was going to try and touch on many things "lightly with vivid little details." As for whether he intended to add a philosophical dimension that would somehow contribute to an anti-nuclear sentiment, he was firm in his answer, making reference to another piece about nuclear weapons and war that was published by *The New Yorker* in the early eighties - "The Fate of the Earth," by Jonathan Schell. Hersey said he found the first part, which described in detail the devastating human consequences of a worldwide nuclear cataclysm, "very powerful and thoroughly terrifying, and that made his argument better than the latter parts, when Schell began trying to persuade. There, it seemed to me that it became forced and shrill."

Summarizing his thoughts about activist authors, he said, "If a direction comes out of what is written about Hiroshima, it should come from professional activists. Writing is the seed work, the preparation of the mind that makes it ready to act when it sees what might be appropriate. I think as writers, that's how we should think about what we do."

Hersey's follow-up, which was 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.