

The Unforgettable Night of the Great Air Raid

頭から消えない大空襲の夜

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It was a little humid that night. I got out of the bath and went up to the second floor, fan in hand. While I sat by the long handrail with the window completely open, looking out at the darkness towards the seaside Onsen Theater and Ryoukoku Hall, I thought about them carrying the *mikoshi* (a divine palanquin used in Shinto rituals) into the water for the upcoming summer Tenjin Festival (*Tenjin Matsuri*). Even though I don't remember any particular sound, deep flames stained reddish yellow rose tall into the night sky over toward the darkened Shiroyama.

“They must have got the broadcasting station. Run!” my father yelled from downstairs. Even as he spoke, fires started up in the area around Nakasu and the Prefectural Office.

My older sister put the *ihai* (ancestral tablet in Buddhism) in the baby carriage with her baby, and taking her five year old child ran off with our maid in the direction of Tomida. My father, my little brother and I put our motionless mother into our bicycle drawn cart, and because we had no place to hide set off towards what we called Ai-gaisha, the plaza two doors down.

Where I had played as a child and talked about my dreams as a teenager, there were four or five canopy-less air raid shelters under construction. When we reached their riverside walls, drops of fire fell like thick rain. Even though I was paralysed with fear, somehow I managed to get in the shelter. A newly built house near the wall was already engulfed in flames, and the shelter, with ten people inside, filled with smoke. My nose and eyes hurt, and I couldn't breathe.

Just as I was wondering if it was all was for nothing, a soldier who was in the shelter started scooping up river water with his helmet, and went back and forth pouring water on us dozens of times. He had apparently been returning to the barracks after a night away in Komatsushima, and encountered the flames on his way back. My life was saved by this stranger, even though I didn't even know his name or voice.

Eventually, when night turned to dawn we went outside and saw a hellish scene – sunk in the river, a body with a big bag, on its back, missing a leg. A body hit by a bomb. A small boat pulling up corpses. I had never seen anything like it before. Even now, the scene is seared permanently into my mind.

We had set aside three warehouses of food and clothing, but they had all been completely burnt, so from the next day on I had nothing but the shirt and pants I was wearing on my body. Did someone give me some underwear? No matter how much I

think, I can't remember.

When I think about Japan's amazing expansion after that, thanks to everyone's frantic effort, hardships, and intellect, I feel full of pride for the nation and myself.

In order to continue maintaining our prosperity and security, everyone living together and surviving in peace, I think we have to keep working hard to eliminate war, while still keeping those turbulent days in mind.