

Sr. Lucia Joseph Akie Aratani, SNDdeN

Excerpt from an article by Gail DeGeorge

At the time the atomic bomb exploded, she was 11 years old. She was attending a school just outside the city but would return to her house near the Hiroshima train station after.

School started at 8 a.m., but the students had to be at school at 7 a.m. to work in the school's garden. On the morning of August 6, the students had done their hour of farming work and were on the second floor of the school in their classroom. Class was about to start.

Aratani was seated in the front row. She remembers seeing her teacher standing up from her desk and going to the podium, and "all of a sudden, there was a flash with a beautiful orange color — bright orange. It was very transparent. . . . I turned my head to the other side and from the window, the white building across the way turned blue from the light. Then all of a sudden, bam! A great sound and all the windows fell with a great noise."

"I was so scared," Aratani said. "I was crazy enough to run away from the site."

She took her backpack with her lunch and her school helmet and ran. She had to be careful walking because of the holes in the floor, and there was shattered glass everywhere.

She ran to her teacher's house near the school.

"My mother told me she would come [if there was an emergency], so I just waited at my teacher's house," Aratani said.

She went into a storage house and saw her teacher's brother and others coming up on a hill. She saw people were injured and burned, with some being carried on stretchers.

At that point, "I'm expecting my parents to come find me," Aratani said. Her teacher, who wanted to find out what happened to the students, came looking for her. The school was rearranged as an emergency center.

She remembers one scene in particular at the emergency center: "One mother was trying to take care of her baby, trying to feed her. But she was greatly burned and shaking. She was all black and red and must have been in great pain but needing to feed the baby. But the baby wasn't moving. That scene stays in my mind. I don't forget, even now."

Before the light fell, she and some friends wanted to go home, so they walked part of the way to Hiroshima but were sent back — the city was in flames. She stayed at her teacher's house, then later went up in the mountains to the relatives of her teachers.

"We were looking at the city burning," Aratani said.

She remembers seeing soldiers on the road, some lying down without hats or hair. They were asking for water. She remembers someone shouting that if the victims were given water, they would die. (Although they were not aware that a nuclear weapon had been used, they had watched people die from shock shortly after being given water.)

Her sister found her with the teacher's relatives. "Our houses were all burning — still burning the whole week. A tree trunk kept burning for a week downtown. We're still in wartime, so the fighter jets were still coming."

"From August 7 on, the city was filled with the stench of death," Aratani said. The bodies were covered with maggots and flies. Three days later, group cremation began.

After the bombing, many priests came to Hiroshima. Aratani's sister decided to get baptized and took Aratani to church and to catechism class.

A very famous German priest, Fr. Hubert Cieslik, was among a small group of Jesuit priests in Hiroshima who survived the bomb.

"He was a very gentle man," Aratani said.

The priest spoke in slow Japanese, but Aratani loved his sermons. She didn't like Mass at first — it was in Latin and the priest wasn't facing the congregation. She didn't want to go at all, but he helped her understand it.

She was baptized, and her mother came to the ceremony in a kimono. Aratani still has a card from her baptism.

"It was a grace from God, and I fell in love with prayer," she said.

Every morning, she would go to Mass with her sister, walking to the church and to school. She was very impressed with the Catholic sisters who taught and cared for them.

"I wanted to be a sister — from the blood of my heart," she said. "They took care of us. I never had any doubt."