

Sr. Agnes Eleanor Kazuko Hirota, SNDdeN

Excerpt from an article by Gail DeGeorge

She was 5 years old and playing outside with friends when the bomb dropped.

The house cracked, and she remembers suddenly being under the house.

"If I stayed still there, we could all have been dead, but I saw a slight, dim light, so we walked," Hirota said.

She led her playmates toward the light to a nearby river. Her mother came looking for her and found her near the river, where her father also reunited with them. She lost track of what happened to her friends. She would learn later that she was the only survivor.

"As we were there at the river, the oily rain, the black rain came," Hirota said. The dark rain, which fell for about 30 minutes after the mushroom cloud formed above Hiroshima, contained soot and dust with radioactive particles from the bomb.

Hirota, her father and her mother went to a nearby tree to take cover. Hirota's mother was badly injured by falling debris, and her brother brought his friends to carry her mother on a stretcher. She was so little that others could carry her, Hirota said.

While she was waiting for her older brother, people kept going into the river for water. Many who went into the river died — some by drowning, some from severe injuries and others from shock.

"That is something I always carry in my heart: All my friends are gone. God must be requiring me to live differently," Hirota said. "So that has always been my question. What is my mission? What is it I have to accomplish?"

On August 8, "we lost our mother. She called me to her side and told me her last message: to stay strong," Hirota said.

The next day, her father died.

"My father asked me for a glass of water, I brought it to him, he drank the water and passed away," she said.

Her brother and sister weren't able to be with her parents in their last moments.

"At a young age, I got to see death, and I understand what it is like to die," Hirota said. "I'm not very scared of death. It is very quiet, it is very austere."

Without her parents, life was difficult for Hirota. Her oldest brother was 20 and took care of her and her sister. He sent Hirota and her sister to a Catholic school instead of a public one because it offered a better education.

"I took it as a calling, and I became a nun," Hirota said.

Her brother had four children, so it couldn't have been easy to pay the tuition, she said.

"God has always protected me all the way up to now," she said.

She said she was less than a half-mile from the epicenter of the bombing and is grateful she has never been hospitalized with any effects from it. At 76, "I am still up and standing and teaching in kindergarten and thankful for the things I can do."

Throughout her work as a teacher, Hirota said she has felt called to convey the message of peace to her students.

"Where there is justice, there is peace," she tells her kindergarten students.

"I tell the children their quarrels are little wars — even at that young age, they need to learn to make peace," Hirota said.

"We can grow peace," she said. "It's the peace that we should pass down to generations."