The Hiroshima Maidens Project at the Margins of History: Quaker Facilitation of Spiritual Rebirth and Rejuvenation

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The Bomb

The United States unleashed unprecedented atomic force on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, bringing immeasurable shock and awe to the citizens of both countries. In Hiroshima, where Enola Gay co-pilots Robert Lewis and Paul Tibbets had dropped the atomic bomb in the morning hours, “unlucky” survivors emerged from the rubble to find that a virtual moonscape had replaced their city. Miyoko Matsubara, a Hiroshima survivor and 12-year-old school student at the time, recounts her experiences in vivid detail in “The Spirit of Hiroshima” (1999). After regaining consciousness and adjusting to the ominous “dark” wrought by the bomb, Matsubara stumbled home through a ground zero of material and human destruction, traumatic reminders of the bomb’s awesome force: “All of [the people] were almost naked and looked like characters out of horror movies with their skin and flesh horribly burned” (Matsubara).

A group of female students at the Hiroshima Commercial High School shared the terror and confusion of the cataclysmic bombing, described in detail by Rodney Barker in Hiroshima Maidens: A Story of Courage, Compassion, and Survival. Barker presents the story of Hiroko Tasaka, an “unlucky” survivor of the blast among the small group of students who were fortuitously protected in the high school basement at the time of the bombing. Hiroko suffered immediate physical and mental consequences from the atomic explosion, as “there was a searing white dazzle that prickled hotly and she [thought] she had been shot before she blacked out” (Barker 22). Suspended between life and death, Hiroko awoke to a Hiroshima in an altered state, with “the afternoon sun sink[ing] into a plume of purple smoke rising over [the city]” and the reality that “her fate was out of her hands...[and that] she had done everything she could to stay alive.” These sensations of helplessness and futility would foreshadow her standing as a maimed survivor when the city began to regain its footing.

The Project

The plight of these survivors was disregarded until 1955, when Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto of Hiroshima joined forces with American philanthropist Norman Cousins to organize the “Hiroshima Maidens” project, named for the young, female participants who had been deemed inadequate for marriage by traditional Japanese standards. The project, a singular act of post-bomb redress, addressed both the functional deformities inflicted by the bomb and the “suspension” of survivors like Miyoko Matsubara and Hiroko Tasaka between “life”—joining in the rejuvenation of the city of Hiroshima—and immediate death from the force of the bomb. In peaceful defiance of mainstream American political and cultural impulses, Quaker civilians associated with the New York Friends Center (NYFC) and the Pendle Hill seminary in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, coordinated and financed this humanitarian undertaking—opening their hearts, homes, and institutions to the women by providing an “outpatient” community and a spiritual womb in between reconstructive surgeries1 at the Mount Sinai Hospital on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in New York City.

The efforts to facilitate the physical and psychological rejuvenation of the Hiroshima Maidens between May 1955 and late 1956 come to life in scarcely referenced archival documents from the NYFC and from Pendle Hill, available at the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. The Maidens project that emerges from these documents indicates a natural, well-intentioned detachment, on the part of the Quakers, from political and cultural milieu in both countries: a) in Japan, peaceful disregard for the relegation of the young women to the margins of society on the basis of their visible deformities; and b) in the United States, defiance of both the American government in its tireless efforts to squelch “anti-nuclear” activities and of the press in its misinterpretations and misrepresentations of the project’s purpose and effects. The resultant dichotomy between the “manipulative opportunism” of the

1 Mount Sinai physicians Arthur Barsky and William Hitzig performed over 125 surgeries on the twenty-five Hiroshima Maidens from June 1955 to June 1956. (Chisholm 99)
government and press and the “genuine altruism”2 of the Quaker facilitators who offered love and hospitality to the Hiroshima Maidens thus highlights the Quaker community’s profound investment in this singular act of “people-to-people” democracy.

**Cultural Contexts**

**Japan: The Maidens at the Margins of Society**

Individual and systematic responses to the Hiroshima bombing materialized in numerous forms, reflecting the divisions in Japanese and American society: in Japan, a contrast emerged between the heart-wrenching accounts of Hiroshima survivors like Miyoko Matsubara and Hiroko Tasaka and the organized campaign for citywide rehabilitation and rejuvenation; and in the United States, a divide emerged between individual expressions of moral outrage at the deployment of atomic weaponry and the absence of full-fledged, national apology from the American government. Hiroshima Mayor Tadao Watanabe initiated a series of projects to realize “both the physical rehabilitation of Hiroshima and its [symbolic] promotion as a ‘peace city’” (Yavenditti 22), but the public focus on rebuilding the city readily eclipsed the individual needs of “unlucky” survivors. The construction of the downtown—and thus highly visible—Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Atomic Museum cemented communal aspirations for rebirth. “contribut[ing] to the image of Hiroshima as an ‘experiment’ in time of peace” and for transforming public, bomb-related traumas into a cogent call for amity and disarmament. But while the city of Hiroshima vigorously regained its footing, the stigmatization of the young women disfigured in the atomic explosion persisted as a societal trauma—an “unwelcome,” visual reminder of the 1945 bombings and a basis for exclusion from social conventions like employment and marriage. Anne Chisholm considers this stark incongruity in *Faces of Hiroshima*: “Along with a resurgent vitality there was a dark side to the rapid re-establishment of urban life in Hiroshima. Ambivalent, even hostile feelings [endured] towards people who were visibly damaged by the atomic explosion” (Chisholm 35).

**The United States: Defensive and Offensive Vanguard of the Atomic Age**

American responses to the dropping of the atomic bomb were equally divided; even in the midst of postwar calls for the abatement of nuclear buildup and the restoration of prewar conceptions of “humanity,” the American government maintained a definitive *modus operandi*: continue nuclear buildup, forgo the issuing of an official apology to Japan for the material and human destruction in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and crush “anti-nuclear” commentary and activities in the United States. The government sustained this stance in response to the proposal for the Hiroshima Maidens project by Reverend Marvin Green of the Hiroshima Peace Center Associates3, Norman Cousins’ outreach organization. While the American Counsel in Kobe, Japan, cautioned that the project’s symbolism would undercut “our [the United States government’s] worldwide efforts to deemphasize the destructive effects of nuclear weapons” (Stier 127), the Eisenhower administration ultimately granted “implicit approval... as long as it [the project] was not billed as an [explicit] act of expiation or atonement for dropping the bomb, or confused with a form of government restitution” (Barker 73). This political framework left minimal room for any broad-reaching, national efforts to offer redress to the citizens of Hiroshima for the traumas inflicted by the bomb, thus laying the groundwork for the realization of the Hiroshima Maidens project as an act of “people-to-people” democracy.

**Dissent and Deterrence:**

**Japan: From the Margins to the Centerfold**

Undeterred by the “ambivalent, even hostile feelings” (Chisholm 35) towards *hikabusha*4 and seemingly immutable cultural standards in Japan, Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto, a Hiroshima survivor who had completed his theological training in the United States, moved to confront the marginalization of the “unlucky” female survivors who were forced to “live on as an involuntary symbol of the world’s first experience of nuclear war” (Chisholm viii). The formation of a spiritual support group for the young women who would later become the “Hiroshima Maidens” and of the Hiroshima Peace Center Foundation (Barker 58) cemented Reverend Tanimoto’s determination to transcend the values of “a society that placed such

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2 Peter Schwenger introduces this terminology in “Hiroshima’s America, America’s Hiroshima.”

3 The Hiroshima Peace Center Associates served as the American counterpart to Reverend Tanimoto’s Hiroshima Peace Center Foundation; the two organizations worked in cohort to advocate for the needs of the Hiroshima Maidens. (Barker 58)

4 *Hikabusha*: the widely-accepted term used in Japan to refer to “explosion-affected people” (Chisholm 35).
great emphasis on aesthetic presentation” (Barker 55). Linking his organization to the Hiroshima Peace Center Associates and thus to Quaker humanitarian Norman Cousins, Reverend Tanimoto defied prevalent, post-bomb attitudes by establishing a “position to initiate programs to help the walking wounded” (Barker 58)—those “unlucky” survivors seemingly suspended between life and death since the bombings of August 1945.

United States: Norman Cousins as a Bridge to and for the Hiroshima Maidens

Reverend Tanimoto’s appeals for outside assistance in his efforts to aid the maimed young women landed in the graces and capacities of Norman Cousins, establishing a partnership that would connect the Hiroshima Maidens to the NYFC and Pendle Hill members and thus render the project a uniquely Quaker undertaking on the basis of reigniting love and life in the bodies and souls of the maimed women. Cousins, the editor of The Saturday Review of Literature and a passionate, anti-nuclear activist, had marked his ground as a lone bastion for anti-nuclear commentary in the early post-bomb years. While Cousins had noted in Who Speaks for Man? (1953) that a recent visit to Hiroshima had defied his expectations, as he “expected resignation [and] found rehabilitation... [and] expected desolation [and] found rejuvenation” (Cousins “Who” 85), the journalist-cum-humanitarian hungered for further anti-nuclear, compensatory action. The compatibility of Tanimoto’s and Cousins’ appeals propelled the Hiroshima Maidens project into being, satisfying Tanimoto’s long-term desire to provide spiritual and physical rejuvenation for the young women and Cousins’ desire for unconditional, humanitarian action to allay a sense of “strong personal responsibility for the first atomic weapon to be used against human beings” (Cousins “Voyage”).

The Hiroshima Maidens Project: Quaker Spirit, Facilitation, and Accommodation

Preparations: Unquestioning Compassion

Responding to Tanimoto’s and Cousins’ appeals, the NYFC and Pendle Hill Quakers assumed full responsibility for facilitating the project by offering genuine love, hospitality, and cultural sensitivity to the fragile women during their stay in the United States. NYFC Chairman Frank C. Ortloff announced the potential project in a letter dated April 5, 1955, employing the language of a strong, service-oriented community: “an opportunity for service has come to [the] Friends Center” (Letter “Ortloff” 5 April 1955). While Ortloff credits Norman Cousins with initial coordination of the project, he ultimately poses a rhetorical question revealing much about the Quakers’ unquestioning altruism and the NYFC’s ideal fit as a surrogate community for the Hiroshima Maidens. Chairman Ortloff asks whether “[w]e shall undertake this responsibility,” but links the response to logistical capacities rather than philosophical ones—“Will you call the Center and report (1) if you can provide hospitality for two girls; (2) if your Meeting will take the Responsibility for a certain number of girls for the entire year” (Letter “Ortloff” 5 April 1955, italics mine). Ortloff’s manner of presentation establishes the compatibility of the Maidens’ needs and the Quaker community’s capacity to aid the young women’s spiritual rejuvenation.

This spirit of unquestioning altruism extended through the ranks of the NYFC, evident in a follow-up memorandum of April 15, 1955 that powerfully depicts the tight-knit, community infrastructure that facilitated the project. Echoing the tone of his initial letter, Ortloff frames the “offers of hospitality and general expressions of interest...[as] encouraging...[and] justify[ing]...proceeding with the project” (Letter “Ortloff” 15 April 1955), which is indicative of the Quakers’ prompt mobilization. Ortloff appeals in this second memorandum for further member involvement, thus announcing a forum for Monday, April 25, 1955 at which NYFC members could pose questions about the project since “we need the advice and council of all Friends...whether or not you can actively participate in any way.” Ortloff’s second memorandum consequently establishes the NYFC Quaker community as a peaceful “bulwark” against an intransigent American government wary of “anti-nuclear,” humanitarian activities, with his proposition of a forum to galvanize and unite “the support of many interested Friends...to carr[y] [out the project] successfully.”

B. Pendle Hill: A Spiritual Womb for the Hiroshima Maidens

Before their welcome into the NYFC community, the Hiroshima Maidens adjusted to life in the United States with a two-week-long stay at the Pendle Hill seminary in Wallingford, Pennsylvania. In a letter written on May 20, 1955 to the local Chester Times, Pendle Hill Director Dan Wilson articulated the
The NYFC subsequently received the Hiroshima Maidens at the end of May 1955, providing a “foster” community in which “[the Maidens] no longer dreaded to be seen” (Letter “Vaught” 25 October 1955) and some semblance of normalcy in their lives as patients and developing souls. NYFC correspondence from October 1955 and March 1956 suggest an honest, apolitical purpose in the Quakers’ aid to the Maidens, beginning with Executive Director Arnold B. Vaught’s expression of confidence in a letter of October 25, 1955 that “there is [so] much love and goodwill [that] I feel certain that the total result will be good.” Executive Committee minutes from early 1956 reinforce these sentiments, first in the warning call on March 13th for “caution on publicity...for fear...[of] exploitation of the girls” (NYFC “Minutes” 13 March 1956). Annual Meeting Minutes from March 20th make explicit the genuine desire of the Friends Center to carry out the project “with the best interests of the twenty-five girls always in mind as the main goal” (NYFC “Minutes Annual” 20 March 1956), specifically the Maidens’ “regaining the use of fingers and arms...[and consequent] improvement in their appearance.”

Progress: Ida Day, Cultural Sensitivities, and Mutual Endearment

A series of memoranda prepared by Ida Day, the NYFC member who spearheaded the NYFC’s hospitality efforts, attest to this honest commitment in the interest of the women and provide logical explanations for their “endear[ment] to the families and communities where they had been staying” (NYFC “Hospitality” 19 June 1955). Conscious of cultural differences and the Maidens’ reportedly timid dispositions, Ida Day offered the assurance in a memorandum of June 19, 1955 that “all of the [Quaker] homes ha[d] been carefully investigated for suitability,” and that “only homes ha[d] been chosen which could offer comfortable space and where the mother of the family was at home during the day,” thus providing a nurturing environment for the host “daughters.” Ms. Day’s “progress reports” from June 1955, October 1955, and April 1956 confirm the affectionate dynamic between the Maidens and their host families kindled by the diligence and cultural sensitivities of the NYFC community. Ida Day writes accordingly in her memorandum of June 19th: while “all [the Maidens] are eager to help and seize upon every opportunity to contribute their talents or assistance,” the host families “want the girls to feel perfectly free to do as they wish...and not be influenced by what the host families do” (NYFC “Hospitality” 19 June 1955).

The progress reports from individual Friends meetings presented in the series of memoranda attest to all of the following: a) the implementation of this commitment; b) the inter-personal intensity of the project for the Quaker benefactors and for the Maidens; and c) the sensation of “this whole experience [as] a two-way project” (NYFC “Report” April 1956). Ida Day emphasized the balance sought between American and Japanese cultural activities at the conclusion of her June memo, reporting, “some girls want to go to the Japanese Church in N.Y. [while] some choose to go to the Methodist Church in their community.” The host family in Plainfield, New Jersey, followed this balanced model, taking its daughters “sight-seeing in New York...up the Empire State Building and [then] to [a] Japanese restaurant.” Responding to the differing interests and dispositions of its host daughters, the host family in Shrewsbury Red Bank, New York, organized activities like ping-pong and volleyball for the Maiden who was “very energetic and...interested in everything” and more solitary pursuits like sewing and cooking for the Maiden who was “more retiring.”
The Hiroshima Maidens project depicted in the memoranda represented a successful effort to rejuvenate the beleaguered women with the consequent emergence of kinship between the families and their host daughters. Ida Day shared her perception in June 1955 that “all [the Maidens] give their hostesses the impression that they are well adjusted and of happy dispositions” (NYFC “Hospitality” 19 June 1955) and again in April 1956, that “they [the Maidens] have endeared themselves to us...[and] have accepted us and have developed a real feeling of belonging” (NYFC “Report” April 1956). The host families’ commitment in the April 1956 memorandum “to help in whatever we can to make their stay here as useful as possible” produced particularly notable results for Sayoko Komatsu, who stayed in Stamford, Connecticut, between surgeries and “opened out like a flower.” The Stamford family reported on Sayoko’s transformation, relating both the perceptions of Sayoko’s sister, who “felt a new Sayoko blossoming” and its sense of pleasure from Sayoko’s heartfelt interest in “growing as a person.”

A “Two-Way Project”: The Hiroshima Maidens and the American Quakers

Norman Cousins⁵ had indeed honored Reverend Tanimoto’s heartfelt dedication to the physical and spiritual rejuvenation of the Hiroshima Maidens in finding surrogate communities with the NYFC and Pendle Hill Quakers. The Swarthmore documents collectively challenge mainstream American political and cultural impulses by substantiating Ida Day’s April 1956 claim that “this whole experience has been a two-way project” (NYFC “Report” April 1956). The host family in Shrewsbury Red Bank, New York, reiterated this sentiment in the April 1956 memorandum, reporting on the dynamic of mutual affection that had materialized: “They came to us shy and timid, but in a loving spirit, and they were received in that which brought them—love.” Just as the Quaker host families valued their time and kinship with the Maidens, describing them as “a wonderful group of girls and...appreci[ating] the enrichment that they have brought into our lives,” the Hiroshima Maidens expressed mutual feelings when they reflected on the experience. Hiroshima Maiden Hideko Harata related these sentiments of kinship in a retrospective letter to Pendle Hill Director Dan Wilson: “I could not but feel that all of you were Japanese...that we are all brothers and sisters” (Letter “Wilson” 25 May 1955).

But despite these obvious exhibitions of genuine love, hospitality, and compassion, secondary interpretations of the Hiroshima Maidens project generally fail to achieve the following: a) to define the undertaking as a necessary enterprise to relieve the young women of their physical and psychological burdens outside the confines of Japan and thus freed from deeply entrenched cultural mores; and b) to characterize the NYFC and Pendle Hill as ideal spiritual communities to aid in the Maidens’ rebirth and rejuvenation rather than as aggressive advocates of American postwar, post-bomb values. Hiroshima Mayor Tadao Watanabe incidentally honored each of these truths in a letter of February 17, 1956 to the NYFC, writing the following in appreciation of the Quaker efforts: “We have no words...to express our appreciation to you...for your highly humanistic deed originating in your lofty religious belief...without which they [the Maidens] would have been forlorn and helpless” (Letter “Watanabe” 17 February 1956, italics mine). Even if the history of the Hiroshima Maidens project has been historically entangled with what University of Wisconsin scholar Paul Boyer considers a “disparity between the mythic past inscribed in popular memory and the past that is the raw material of historical scholarship” (Engelhardt), the NYFC and Pendle Hill documents at the Friends Historical Library provide ample material with which to interpret the historical truths of the project: the Quaker provision of apolitical and well-intentioned love, hospitality, compassion in the unselfish interest of facilitating the spiritual rebirth of the Hiroshima Maidens.

References

5. Engelhardt, Tom and Edward T. Linenthal, eds. History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other

⁵ After the conclusion of the project, Norman Cousins “adopted” Hiroshima Maiden Shigeko Nimoto, welcoming her into his family since “it was...true that she was an intimate part of the family circle” (Barker 1999).


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