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How authentic international exchange should unfold:
Reflection through atomic bombing

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The movies “Oppenheimer”, depicting a researcher involved in the development of atomic bombs, and “Barbie” were released simultaneously in the U.S. the other day. I heard that edited pictures of Barbie with a mushroom cloud hairstyle posted on social media have sparked an uproar.

I learned about the controversy a few days before the 78th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9, which caused catastrophic damage to both cities. Approximately 210,000 people died as a result of these bombings. The accurate number of deaths is still unknown. “Children of the A-bomb”, a compilation of testimonials from children affected by the bombing of Hiroshima, was translated into multiple languages. Even the testimony written by a four-year-old child at the time of the bombing felt so real that it was as if I could see the terrible scene of a blinding light, people enduring severe burns, and wandering desperately for water.

I have had numerous opportunities to learn about the A-bombings in classes and through inquiry-based learning activities. History textbooks feature black-and-white pictures captured in the moments after the bombs were dropped. I've engaged with learning materials themed around A-bombings in ethics classes. The media occasionally broadcast footage of the bombings and run special programs about them. Sirens are sounded across the country every year on the anniversary day of the bombings, and people observe a moment of silence for those who perished. People in Japan learn about the A-bombings since childhood; understanding the reality of these events is an integral part of Japanese education.

I had a new experience this summer when our family hosted a seventeen-year-old high school student from the U.S. We spent about two weeks together, forming a good friendship that crossed national boundaries. Through our conversations, I learned firsthand about the differences in cultures and values. The time we shared became a truly cherished memory, filled with laughter and enjoyment, despite our differences. While spending time with her, thoughts of the A-bombs crossed my mind. I wanted to know what her perspective might be as an American. However, I couldn't bring myself to ask directly, fearing it might ruin the

connection we had built. I contacted her when she returned, and she answered several questions that I asked. She mentioned that she has heard about the A-bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the media there rarely covers the topic on the anniversary day. According to her, only the attack on Pearl Harbor is taught in schools, and A-bombs are never part of the curriculum. The suffering of the Japanese is never taught. Having had many opportunities to learn about the A-bombs myself, I naturally assumed that education on this subject was also a part of the US curriculum. I expected people in the U.S. learned about the tragedy and suffering they caused in Japan. However, finding out the reality was different for the first time really shocked me. A 2020 NHK survey of the younger generation in Japan and the U.S. found that around 70% of American respondents did not consider nuclear weapons necessary. In my American homestay friend's opinion as well, she mentioned that she felt the bombings were a result of the U.S. reacting too harshly to the situation. While I've heard the U.S. justify the bombings as a way to end the war, I believe the survey results, along with my newly made friend's opinion, suggest a shift in attitudes, particularly among the youth. In an online survey of people aged 18 to 34 conducted by NHK Hiroshima Broadcasting Station in the same year, 76.5% of Hiroshima respondents, 68.7% of Japanese respondents elsewhere, and 80.5% of Americans expressed a desire to learn more about the A-bombings. The percentage among Americans was higher than that among Japanese counterparts. When I looked at the figures, I thought it was clear that there has been a growing interest among Americans in the bombings in recent years. I believe the fundamental factor behind this is the difference in education between Japan and the U.S. Americans perceive the bombings as a thing of the past, while the Japanese, who suffered damage from the bombings, view it as an ongoing issue. In my opinion, disparities in education are likely a result of the differing perceptions of the reality of the bombings between the two countries, which I believe has also contributed to the increasing awareness of Americans about A-bombs. On a related note, I think that the SNS incident I mentioned at the beginning most likely stemmed from a disparity in awareness resulting from differences in education. For example, when a reporter approached an American woman on the street, she initially laughed at the sight of the edited image. However, her expression changed to a more serious tone after hearing the reporter's explanations. I feel that this case also highlights the difference in perceptions in America.

Former President Barack Obama made his first visit to Hiroshima as the incumbent U.S. president on May 27, 2016. In his speech, he poignantly addressed the catastrophic damage caused by the A-bombs in Japan and the brutality of nuclear weapons.

The Tohoku region, where I live, witnessed the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, causing immense suffering for many. A group of individuals who faced the challenges of the disaster in Fukushima visited Hiroshima and interacted with *Hibakusha*, survivors of the A-bomb. The *Hibakusha* expressed, "We've been advocating against the creation or possession of nuclear weapons, but our message struggles to reach every corner of the world. Nevertheless, we will never give up. Let's persist in appealing to the world, again and again." I believe that Fukushima and Hiroshima share a common purpose: to disseminate the stories without ever erasing the scars in the past.

I met an American student this summer, and the cross-border exchange I have experienced firsthand really shaped my view on what international exchange should be for me. "Striving to share your own country's history without giving up and actively learning about the past in other nations," that, to me, is "authentic international exchange". Having said that, undoubtedly, realizing this isn't easy, but dismissing it as impossible won't get us there. In my view, merely establishing friendly relations between nations falls short of authentic international exchange. It is truly realized when both of the factors I mentioned are accomplished. I believe that we should refer to someone who does this as a "true global citizen". Hesitating to ask for opinions about the A-bombs directly would have been something that such an individual would never do. The *Hibakusha* of the A-bombs behind this topic are rapidly aging, raising concerns about the ability to pass down their stories to posterity. A commitment to connecting the past with the next generation is essential to remember that there were people who suffered and to ensure that the mistakes of the past are never repeated. In the more globalized international community, countries must walk hand in hand with all nations, taking into account their various backgrounds. It is therefore my belief that we all have the obligation to work to tirelessly to bring the reality of the A-bombings to the attention of the world. This can only be achieved by the repetition of steady effort. I aspire to be a "true global citizen", who can engage in "authentic international exchange".