

Hiroshima, August 2020

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*It has been slightly edited for clarity*

Green amidst hell of gray ash, pain and death  
The trees remember the wounds of Hiroshima  
Seeds, stalks and saplings become missionaries of memory

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Marta Mladenova talks about the trees from Hiroshima in the show "Isotopia"

If we walk in Hiroshima, we will see special trees. If at least one of them could speak in words, he would probably say, "I felt the explosion with my stem. My leaves were falling out. I still carry my wounds today, but I will protect you with my new branches and leaves for many years to come. I blossomed in spite of you and for you people."

In the Japanese city, which was hit by the atomic bomb on August 6, 1945, some 170 trees survived the explosion within a 2-kilometer radius from the epicenter, where the bomb had exploded, Nassrine Azimi, co-founder of the Green Legacy Hiroshima (GLH) told Isotopia. GLH was founded in 2011 and distributes seeds, shoots and saplings of these trees around the world.

Trees that survived the horror are also in Nagasaki, where an atomic bomb was dropped three days after the first attack, but so far GLH's activities are mainly in Hiroshima.

Nassrine Azimi (Photo: Hiroshima's Green Legacy) settled in the Japanese city many years ago, where her work at the UN took her. The trees in Hiroshima that survived the bombing caught her eye immediately. She (was looking at) them one by one until she realized that they are "a whole orchestra."

"I started discussing this issue with friends and especially with my dear friend Tomoko Watanabe. She runs an NGO, but her family's roots are here and she is extremely connected to this city. She welcomed my idea and immediately began conversations with gardeners, architects and historians. We found that there were written traces of trees in the city," Nassrine recalled. According to her, the spread of these trees in as many places in the world as possible will allow more people to hear "their old song".

Even before the organization was founded, seedlings of some survivor trees were being

donated by the Hiroshima administration to important guests of the city. However, Nassrine and Tomoko changed that. The seeds, stalks and saplings are still given for free, but against the promise to be planted and taken care of.

"We urge our partners to remember that this is a tree stalk that survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. These trees are ambassadors, missionaries. They are really very valuable because they can share so much of the experience, albeit silently," Nassrine said.

When they started the project, they intended to do a long, serious study before announcing it officially. "But in March 2011, there was the earthquake, tsunami and accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, and together with Tomoko, we felt it was time to start. The world needed to hear the stories of these silent witnesses to the Hiroshima nuclear attack. In Nagasaki, too," explains Nassrine.

Oslo, Norway, 2017 Hiroshima survivor Tanaka Terumi examines pots of soil and seeds from surviving trees. Photo: EPA / BGNES

"Many of the trees were injured. Some of them are black on the side from which the wave hit them. Others either have holes in the trunk or have had to be reinforced over the years, others look quite unusual. However, they are beautiful. They continue to produce seeds, fruits and flowers. You know, people come here from all over the world - from Afghanistan, Europe and elsewhere. They are amazed by the appearance of the trees that bear the scars but continue to live. Their resilience is incredible. The truth is that we all bear the scars of tragedy. Each of these trees with severe wounds can die any day, but fortunately this does not happen. They are alive, just as humans survived the horror and because they have a very important message to the world. This is a very important and urgent message. We have to listen to them," Nassrine is convinced.

Photo: Hiroshima's Green Legacy

"After the atomic bombing for the people of Hiroshima, the world was colored only in black, white and gray. Even then, there was a very serious debate about whether the city could ever be rebuilt in the same location. Many people died every day. No one was sure what the radiation level was and what would happen at all. The months passed - December, January, and people continued to die from their wounds and radiation. "Everyone felt that nothing would sprout in this place, there would be no life at all for the next 75 years," Nassrine said, citing countless eyewitness accounts of survivors of the horror of the nuclear explosion.

"But in the spring, some of the trees budded. Imagine the small green buds from which the flowers and fruits of the trees appear, the new leaves. Green in this hell of gray ash, of darkness, pain and death. I think this was a very symbolic moment for the people of Hiroshima. It is very beautiful. We constantly hurt nature, but it somehow manages to cope and life makes its way. And that continued in the 1950s and 1960s, when Hiroshima was still recovering from the horrors of the atomic bomb," Nassrine added.

Hiroshima Memorial Park Photo: EPA / BGNES

The Hiroshima administration's archives are helping the GLH team and project.

"It's a miracle for me, because I'm not Japanese, that people have started recording what happens to the trees and leaving written traces. Then I discovered that this is a very characteristic Japanese trait. They began collecting and storing information about the trees that were there before the bombing. It is impressive because before the tragedy such trees were everywhere - in schools, parks, temples, and then - almost everywhere. When the city was rebuilt from the rubble and new infrastructure was built, some of these trees had to be moved so that a road could pass through it or a building could be built. However, the Japanese took care of the trees and described it very carefully," Nassrine said, quoting from memory:

"For example, this tree was first there, then moved to another location. It grew from a stump that was thought to be dead.

Memorial ceremony dedicated to the memory of the tragic events in Hiroshima Photo: EPA / BGNES

"The message is that we must also remember that the Earth and the soil - they have their own memories. When I first arrived in Japan and visited memorials and museums, I was very surprised because there was often only text. There were (less) objects and things, as I would expect based on my experiences in European and American museums and memorials. But I realized this was text that should provide us with memory. An archive that should never disappear and thanks to which everything can be restored. We know so much about the trees that witnessed the atomic bombing, because (so much) was recorded. If the survivors weren't so precise, it would be extremely difficult for us to take on our mission ", Nassrine sums up and invites the Bulgarian National Botanical Garden to contact GLH to get seedlings from these special trees.

Listen to the whole report of Marta Mladenova in the sound file.