



Mayors for Peace Youth Exchange for Peace

Support Programme for “Hiroshima & Peace” August 2016

Report and Planned Peace Activities by Aibhlín O’Leary



Lantern Ceremony in Hiroshima, August 6th 2016

Overview

In May 2016 I was selected as one of two students who would represent the city of Manchester in the Mayors for Peace Youth Exchange Programme in Hiroshima City University that August. I was honoured to have been selected, and very excited, but had absolutely no idea what to expect! I had never been to Japan before, and while enrolled in an MA programme on Peace and Conflict Studies, my studies had not focused on the atomic bombing of Japan, or the issues of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. The Mayors for Peace programme changed this completely; the 10-day programme in Hiroshima City University was an amazing learning experience, and my stay in Japan was beyond doubt one of the best times of my life.

Hiroshima & Peace: A New Perspective

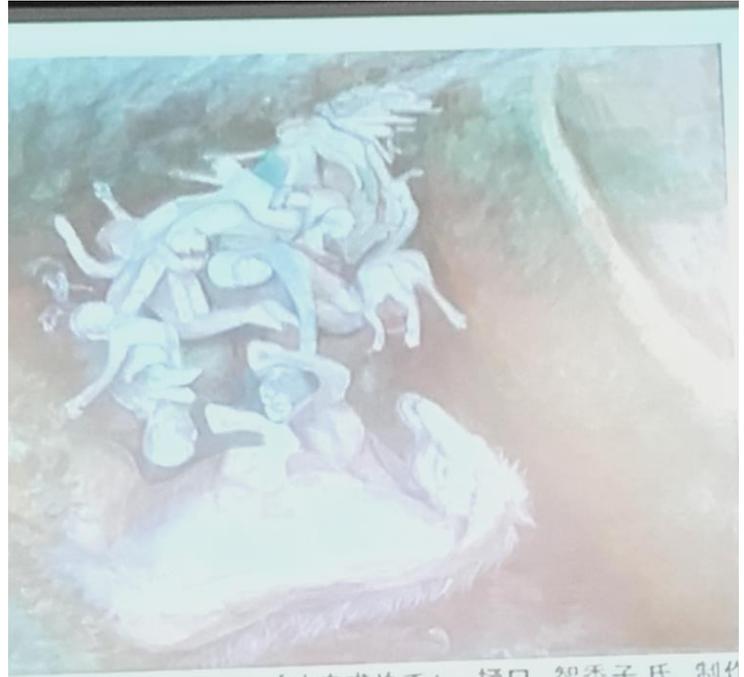
The course at Hiroshima City University provided a wonderful opportunity to engage both academically and personally with the history of the atomic bomb and with the issues of nuclear weapons and nuclear power more generally. Lecturers from global institutions gave talks on a wide variety of subjects, including World War II, Japanese history, Korean victims of the bombing, Fukushima and Chernobyl, the international criminal justice system, and many more. These lectures provided me with many new and different perspectives on the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the victims and aggressors of WWII, and the development of nuclear weapons since 1945.

Dr. Robert Jacobs from the Hiroshima Peace Institute gave two fantastic lectures on these topics, firstly detailing the developments which led to the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and secondly discussing the drastic consequences which humanity will have to face over the coming decades due to the very existence of nuclear weapons and nuclear power. Both he and Dr. Brian Hallett disputed the claim that the atomic bomb was dropped in order to end the war, tracing instead the discourse of scientific progress and military might which fuelled America's development of nuclear weapons.

I also learned about the efforts of civil society organisations globally to promote disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the replacement of nuclear power with green forms of energy. Disarmament movements across the world stress attempt to de-legitimize nuclear weapons by stressing their inhumane nature and appalling humanitarian consequences, however politically nuclear weapons are still seen by nuclear powers as prestigious and a sign of importance. We need to banish this preconception from the minds of the nuclear powers, and seek instead to find an alternative security system.

The most memorable elements of the course were our visit to the Peace Memorial Museum and our meetings with two Japanese *hibakusha*. Their testimonials, along with those in the museum, of the horrors of the atomic bombing were unforgettable. The "living hell" of the bombing as described by Keiko Ogura was vividly brought to life in the museum, as photographs and models showed the pain of skin dangling from flesh, and bodies burnt beyond recognition. I was shocked and saddened to hear how the *hibakusha* were discriminated against after the bombing, and of the difficulties survivors faced in the years to come in finding a job and even getting married! I was also surprised to learn about the Korean *hibakusha*, as I had never considered the fact that there were victims who were not Japanese, and yet 10% of the victims in Hiroshima were in fact Korean. These tales were also extremely sad, particularly as many of the Koreans victims had been forced to come to Japan during the war as labourers. However, what I found most moving about meeting the *hibakusha* was their capacity to forgive, and the passion they showed in telling their stories, in the hope that by doing so they would ensure such horrors were never repeated. This acceptance of the past was exemplified in their attitude towards President Obama's visit – one *hibakusha* said that she did not want Obama to apologize, and that she welcomed his visit from her heart.

Below top left: model showing the hypocentre of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, August 6th 1945; bottom left: display in the Peace Memorial Museum showing President Barack Obama making origami cranes during his visit to Hiroshima in May 2016; right: A Japanese hibakusha shares her story.



Some of my greatest teachers in Japan were my host family, who were also some of the kindest people I have ever met. They adopted me into their family and taught me a range of Japanese traditions and customs, from making sushi rolls to Taiko. They even dressed me in a yukata and brought me to a tea ceremony! I will be eternally grateful for their friendship and hospitality.



Plans for Peace Activities

Since returning from Japan I have begun arranging events to share my experiences from Hiroshima with students and young people in my community. Over the coming months I plan to hold the following information events:

- In late October will give a talk in my former high school and another school in my local town on what I learned in Hiroshima, and the importance of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.
- In February 2017 I will give a talk to history students in my alma mater, the National University of Ireland, Galway, who are studying World War II and the history of humanitarianism, to share the insights I have gained from the Hiroshima & Peace programme.
- I will work with Sean Morris in Manchester to arrange awareness-raising events both in the city and at the University of Manchester over the coming months.
- In the first week of October I will be meeting the Japanese peacebuilding organisation Peace Boat in The Hague (in my capacity as an intern with GPPAC), and will share my insights on disarmament with the students in attendance.
- I will write articles for local and community newspapers on each of the above activities to engage the broader public with Mayors for Peace.

Proposals for Mayors for Peace Nuclear Weapon Abolition Activities

I believe that one of the most effective ways that Mayors for Peace can promote nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation is by sharing the testimonials of the *hibakusha* as far as possible. I believe that these testimonials have the greatest impact when delivered in person, and so I think that Mayors for Peace should aim to engage members of the *hibakusha* community and facilitate their attendance at meetings in member cities around the world. Other activities that I intend to embark upon to assist Mayors for Peace in their work are:

- I will work with Sean Morris of the Manchester City Council to encourage more Irish city councils to become members.
- I will meet with current Irish Mayors and other political representatives, and share with them my experience in Hiroshima to encourage them to do more to support nuclear disarmament. I will particularly stress the legacy which Ireland has with regards to non-proliferation and disarmament, and encourage them to build upon this with further commitments.

Conclusion

The Mayors for Peace Youth Exchange Programme was an absolutely incredible experience, one which I shall never forget. On returning from Hiroshima I am fully committed to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, and intend to dedicate my time and energy to this cause

voluntarily, and I hope to build a career in this area in the future. I have returned an enthusiast for all things Japanese, and am sure that my trip to Hiroshima will be the first of many visits. Thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity.

