

MY FATHER LOOKED AT Nagasaki and saw something beyond military success, something that portended ill for his own people too, for people everywhere. He described his sense of the place this way:

It is just almost impossible to verbally convey the feeling of walking through miles and miles of shattered tops of what had been little homes, with nobody, nobody in the area. You can never anticipate seeing such ruins in your whole life, let alone to have endured it. It is certainly beyond any ability I have to describe, because more than seeing it, it is something that you feel. At least I felt it.

He felt appalled, horrified, but he soon saw that was not a common response. He thought that the Marines “acted as if this was just another town that had been taken in the long and bloody trek from Australia through the Pacific.” I continue to be fascinated by my father’s response to the death and destruction around him. He seems to have reacted differently than most other Americans at

the time, seeing the defeat for humanity beyond the victory for the United States. A hideous war was over. The perfidy of Pearl Harbor, the vicious fighting in the Pacific, the atrocities against prisoners of war were all fresh in the minds of the occupying troops—and in my father's. Why was he not simply filled with a sense of triumph or at least relief?

A delegation of Russian naval officers arrived one day on its own train. They looked about the ruins briefly and fixated on a single point of interest. They were fascinated by the street *benjos*. These open urinals consisted of a hole at ground level over which to relieve oneself. Those that were not buried under debris survived the bombing. The idea of such toilets amused the Russians, who took many photographs. Allied sailors too came as tourists and casually picked up burnt roof tiles or melted glass as souvenirs. Nurses had their snapshots taken, smiling, in the ruins of destroyed homes, and then stopped for a quick beer on the train.

Reveling in being alive is not so strange a reaction to overwhelming evidence of mortality. My father was not immune from that feeling. After all, he enjoyed hearty meals with steaks and chickens and cold beer and ice cream requisitioned from military stores and kept in the train's freezer. One evening, during a thunderstorm, he found shelter in the arms of a warm, breathing woman. She was a British captain whose parents had died in the blitzkrieg of London. Yet, he seems to have found the lightheartness and triumphalism somehow especially inappropriate after he saw Nagasaki. Life was worth celebrating, but death deserved respect. The ghosts of the dead city haunted him without regard to whether they were ghosts of the enemy.

My father was a Jewish soldier in an army that had defeated the Nazis. He was within sight of Okinawa when World War II ended. His tent was machine-gunned in Manila. He crossed the Pacific in troop ships risking enemy sub attacks. Kamikaze planes dive-bombed his base in Ie Shima until the day of the surrender. He would

have participated in any invasion of the home islands. He had every reason to celebrate Japan's defeat and to view the Japanese with hatred. Yet he explained his film crew's work in Nagasaki this way:

We were the only people with adequate facilities and equipment to make a record of this holocaust. I felt that if we did not capture this horror on film, no one would ever really understand the dimensions of what had happened.

I try to imagine what I might have felt or done if I had been delivered so dramatically from the relief of victory to the sight of the hard consequences. Would I have wept, or closed my heart and mind to the costs of my own survival, or felt called to bear witness? Would these sights have made me hate all war, or just thank God that my country had the bomb first? Or both?