

Learning Material

Nagasaki Before the Bomb Life in the Downtown Area

Created by
Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition (RECNA), Nagasaki University
Nagasaki National Peace Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims

Abstract

Nagasaki was the tenth most populous city in Japan at the time and was thriving. Its central downtown area was bustling with people, and life was affluent. However, with the onset of the Pacific War, people's lives changed drastically as the war situation worsened. This section features a collection of photos and interviews with Seiichiro Mise, who was born and raised in "Mise Shoten," a wholesaler of clothing, towels, and other goods in the downtown area since his grandfather's time in the Meiji period. These materials highlight the life in downtown Nagasaki of those days.

photo credit

No.002



Name

Seiichiro Mise

Profile

Seiichiro was born in 1935. He was exposed to the atomic bombing at the age of 10 in Yanohira-cho, 3.6 kilometers from the hypocenter. At the time, he was a fifth grader at Irabayashi Elementary School. He lived with his grandmother, mother, brothers, and sisters—a total of eight people—while his father was away in the war. The house where he was born and raised in the center of the city (former Tsukimachi) had been removed due to the forced evacuation of buildings, and the family had just moved to their new location.

Mise Shoten was located right around where I am standing now. It was a wholesaler of towels, handkerchiefs, clothing, and other goods. The store, which also served as our home, was a three-story wooden structure. It had a basement, and I remember playing there a lot.

Explanation

The area where Seiichiro grew up was, and still is, the central downtown area of Nagasaki City. Back then, it was lined with the prefectural government buildings, police stations, courthouses, schools, banks, public markets, and stores.

Photos from that time



Seiichiro standing at the former Tsukimachi 1 (now the Manbashi Bridge area), where he spent his childhood. Photo taken in June 2022.

It was a rare privilege just to own a camera at that time, but my father had a German-made one. That's how well business was going back then. There were a lot of people and many stores around Tsukimachi, so the neighborhood itself was like a department store, where you could find everything.

Explanation

Signs, banners, and people passing by on the street capture the bustle of the shopping district. When Seiichiro was born in 1935, Nagasaki City's population was approximately 210,000, according to that year's national census. It was the second-largest city in Kyushu after Fukuoka City and the tenth largest city in Japan. Tsukimachi was the central area of Nagasaki, a vibrant and busy shopping district.

Taken around 1933 in front of Mise Shoten.
The baby is Mises's older sister, who was born the previous year.



The wooden box on the right side of the photo is what we would now call a cardboard box. Towels and other goods were delivered packed inside these boxes. To open the lid, we had to use a large key-like tool to remove the iron clasp. At that time, the store was overflowing with products, and there was a lot of merchandise.

Explanation

Mise Shoten was founded by Seiichiro's grandfather in the former Tsukimachi as a wholesaler of clothing, towels, and handkerchiefs during the Meiji era. The store also wholesaled school uniforms and work uniforms. Today, it continues to operate as a wholesaler of towels and tenugui handkerchiefs in the central Edo-machi area, just as it did back then.



Taken around 1938 in front of Mise Shoten. His sister is on his right.

Taken around 1938 in front of Mise Shoten. His mother is on the left, and his sister is in front.



I am the one on the horse-head four-wheeler.
The one my sister is riding next to me was
called a 'skate' at the time, which we now
refer to as a kickboard. It was a trendy and
fashionable toy back then.

Explanation

Seiichiro is the second of seven siblings. In the first half of the Showa Era (1926-1989), the country actively encouraged higher birth rates to increase the population for labor and military purposes. The slogan "Give birth, and you shall multiply" was even promoted, making a family of seven siblings not unusual at that time.

Taken in front of Mise Shoten around 1936-37. From left to right: his sister, Seiichiro, his grandmother, and his mother.



The 'Tsukimachi Security Guard Team' was organized by my father and the neighborhood store owners. They wore matching uniforms and even made their own flags. My father, who was a soldier in Japan, led the group. Perhaps that's why he has one more badge than the others.

Explanation

It is believed that this was an air defense group composed of local residents. The group was tasked with guarding, issuing warnings, and managing evacuation centers under military guidance in case of fires caused by air raids.



Taken around the 1930s at Suwa Shrine in Nagasaki City.
His father is in the front row, fourth from the left.

At New Year's, we traveled to Yutoku Inari Shrine in Saga with all the employees and our family members to pray for business prosperity. Looking back now, the children are dressed in high-collar attire. It seems that both business and the social atmosphere were relatively relaxed at that time.

Explanation

Mise Shoten's clientele was diverse, including not only those in Nagasaki City but also the surrounding coal mining areas. When the photo was taken, fashionable children's clothing was available for those who could afford it, but supplies gradually became scarce. By 1940, the following year, the motto "luxury is the enemy" had emerged.

Taken around 1939 at Yutoku Inari Shrine in Kashima, Saga Prefecture.
Seitchiro is in the front row.



This is a picture of me when I started elementary school. There were 60 children in each class, which is equivalent to two classes today. The school was located in a downtown area, so many of us had parents who worked in the stores and public market. I used to visit the housing complex where people from the public market lived and played there.

Explanation

Shinkozen Elementary School, where Seiichiro began his education, had a total enrollment of about 1,700 students. However, after the war, the number of students declined, and the school was closed in 1997. The school building was used as a relief station immediately after the atomic bombing. Today, the site is home to the Nagasaki City Library, which features the "Shinkozen Memorial," a reconstruction of the relief station's scene.



Taken in 1941 at Shinkozen Elementary School. Seiichiro is in the front row, to the left of the female faculty member.

These were the employees who worked at the store. They were like family and helped care for my siblings in place of our parents. Even though I was very young, I clearly remember how one of the employees would get angry with me, and another would send us vegetables from his family's farm during the difficult times of the war.

Taken at Mise Shoten around 1933-34.



Explanation

In 1940, rationing of daily necessities began due to the shortage of goods caused by the war, making it increasingly difficult for Mise Shoten to continue its business. As the war intensified, employees received military summons and left for combat. Some were never seen again amidst the postwar turmoil, but others maintained their connection with Mise Shoten, such as those who helped us during food shortages.

At the end of the war, the government implemented a national policy of 'forced building demolition.' My town was also affected, and our store was demolished in June 1945. I had been temporarily evacuated to a relative's house in Miyazaki Prefecture since that spring, but on August 1, I returned to the Yanohira-cho house where my family had relocated.

Explanation

Most buildings at that time were wooden, and fires spread quickly. To prevent the spread of damage from air raids, the government implemented "forced building demolition" to create open spaces (firebreaks). The targeted areas included those around public facilities, air-raid shelters, and densely populated residential neighborhoods. In Nagasaki City, approximately 610,000 square meters of land were affected, and around 25,000 families lost their homes.



City center before the bombing, after forced building demolitions (photo by U.S. Army).
Courtesy of the Photographic Materials Research Committee,
Nagasaki Foundation for the Promotion of Peace.

On August 9, I was playing the organ at home when the bomb exploded at 11:02 a.m. Fortunately, my family and I were safe, but I lost seven relatives, including a cousin who lived near the hypocenter. If I had still been living in Tsukimachi that day, or if the sky over Nagasaki had been clear and the bomb had been dropped near Tokiwabashi Bridge, the initial target area, I might have lost my life.

Explanation

At center left is the prefectural government office and capitol building. From the center to the far right are houses in Kabashima-cho that escaped the fire. The Tsukimachi Public Wholesale Market is at the far right in the foreground. When the atomic bomb exploded on August 9, 1945, the mountains between this area and the hypocenter initially blocked the heat rays, so the fire did not start immediately. However, from midday to midnight on August 9, a fire broke out near the main prefectural office building and spread.



After the bombing, the Nagasaki Prefectural Government Office area seen from above the Nakajima River. Courtesy of Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum.

Message

When I was a child, life in the city was prosperous. Gradually, employees were drafted into the military, goods became unavailable, stores were demolished, and the atomic bombing claimed the lives of my cousin and others. After the war, we struggled to continue our business without supplies, and the difficult situation persisted. Through these photos, I hope visitors will gain a sense of the scenes and atmosphere of Nagasaki at that time, understand how they changed during the war, and appreciate the value of peace.



Seiichiro Mise

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