



Monument in Hiroshima dedicated to Sankichi Tōge. Illustration by Claire Gilmore

A MONUMENT IN HIROSHIMA

Ali Mahmoud; Shahzeb Hassan; Taha Osman Mohammed; Leonard J. Hoenig, MD

Mr. Mahmoud is a third-year medical student at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, Illinois.

Mr. Hassan is a fourth-year medical student at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, Illinois.

Mr. Mohammed is a fourth-year medical student at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, Illinois.

Dr. Hoenig is a private practice physician in Pembroke Pines, Florida.

In Hiroshima sits a simple rectangular monument. It is a special memorial dedicated to Sankichi Tōge (1917-1953) who survived the atomic blast that destroyed

Hiroshima during World War II. Tōge and his writings aim to serve as a reminder of the true costs of nuclear war.

Tōge was a poet who became the voice of Hiroshima's and Nagasaki's atomic bomb survivors. They are the *hibakusha* (Japanese for "bomb-affected-people"). Tōge is most remembered for his 1951 book, *Poems of the Atomic Bomb*.

Tōge was faced with a poet's dilemma. Can any verse truly capture the horrors of nuclear war? How does one phrase an enduring message for humanity? To solve these challenges, he abandoned the "tanka" or "haiku" formats of traditional Japanese poetry that he had always used. He decided to experiment with a new literary form of "free verse" poetry in which there are no specified number of lines, and the lines have no specified length.¹ One example is his poem *Dying*, which tells the story of a person dying from the bomb. In it the poetic lines end in a death spiral.

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The poem's final verses:¹

Burning body,
scalding throat;
arm
that suddenly collapses;
shoulder
that sinks to the ground.
oh, I can go
no farther.
In the lonely dark,
the thunder in my ears fades.
Ah!
Why?
Why here
by the side of the road
cut off, dear, from you
why
must
I
die
?

Another literary technique Tōge uses for his atomic bomb poetry is to open the poem with a dramatic word that captures the reader's imagination. Thus, in his poem *Shadow*,² he describes the "shadows" left by the very essence of human bodies being etched onto the sides of buildings and the stairs by those close to the bomb when it dropped.

a flash of tens of thousands of degrees
suddenly branded someone's loins
on thick slabs of granite...
near where the people of the city come and go
with goodness and pity but entirely indifferent
bleached by the sun, hit by the rain, buried in the dust
growing fainter with each passing year, that shadow.

Tōge reminds those who pass by what looks like a simple shadow was in fact a human being each with their own story, their own lives, and their own families before there was nothing left of them but their own shadow.

Tōge's poems stand out for another reason. He never mentions his American assailants by name. Not a single mention of the United States or America is anywhere to be found in his poetry, as illustrated by his poem *When Will That Day Come?*¹

Ah, that was no accident, no act of God.
After precision planning, with insatiable ambition,

humanity's first atomic bomb
was dropped, in a single flash,
on the archipelago in the eastern sea, on the Japanese
people;
you were killed,
one of 400,000 victims who died horrible deaths.

By holding back the huge temptation of pointing fingers, Tōge decided to keep his poetry generalizable to dangers of nuclear war. He did this in order to prevent future generations from overlooking the bombings as being an isolated incidence.

In 1938, Tōge was incorrectly diagnosed as having tuberculosis. He suffered from coughing, phlegm and episodes of hemoptysis. Ten years later, the correct diagnosis was made; that he suffered from bronchiectasis. The hemoptysis worsened, and on March 9, 1953, he underwent surgery but died in the operating room.

The monument in Hiroshima, dedicated to Tōge was completed on August 6, 1963. Engraved on the memorial, in both Japanese and English, is Tōge's poem *Give Back The Human*. The English translation is by Miyao Ohara.

Give Back the Human

Give back my father, give back my mother;
Give grandpa back, grandma back;
Give my sons and daughters back.
Give me back myself.
Give back the human race.
As long as this life lasts, this life,
Give back peace
That will never end.

Tōge's final message to us is not just a warning about the dangers of nuclear weapons. It is also a message of hope; a hope that people can learn to coexist in peace. It is also a prayer that no future generation will endure the curse of nuclear war.

References

1. Minear RH (Translator). *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press.
2. Tōge S. Poems of the Atomic Bomb. Thornber K. (Translator). pages 50-51. [https://ceas.uchicago.edu/sites/ceas.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Genbaku shishu.pdf](https://ceas.uchicago.edu/sites/ceas.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Genbaku%20shishu.pdf).

Corresponding author, Leonard J. Hoenig, MD, can be reached by E-mail at gooddoeljh@gmail.com.