Fatherâ□□s warnings twice saved Japanese family from nuclear bombs

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NEW BERN, N.C. (ABP) — Rieko Suganami Evans remembers the sky glowing strangely red behind a huge cloud and one little airplane flying out of the cloud. It was Aug. 6, 1945, and the Japanese city of Hiroshima had just been vaporized in the world's first use of atomic energy as a weapon.

Rieko had left Hiroshima the day before after a warning call from her father – formerly an attaché from the Japanese Imperial Army to Britain who lost favor with the emperor by continually urging him to surrender.

"Get out now!" he told them.

Rieko Suganami Evans upon her college graduation.

Grabbing their bags and hurrying to the train station, Rieko's mother and children left behind the cousins they had come to visit and headed for a safer city — Nagasaki.

Two days later her father called again with the same message. They hurried away from Nagasaki the day before it was destroyed on Aug. 9, finally convincing the emperor to surrender and end the war – and rehabilitating her father's honor.

Sixty-six years after those bombs demonstrated the horrific destructive force of nuclear weapons any reference to Hiroshima and Nagasaki still recalls that dramatic event. And their names sound a constant warning for

vigilance to all nations to avoid nuclear conflict.

Rieko, 72, is a member of First Baptist Church in New Bern, N.C. Childhood events still burn brightly in her memory, although she was too young to understand the significance of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, or her father's expulsion from the emperor's inner circle.

Her father, Maj. Gen. Ichiro Suganami, was an attaché in London before the war. He maintained his intelligence connections and knew America was developing a bomb with the capacity to eradicate an entire city in an instant. He urged the emperor to surrender to avoid that fate for Japan.

Instead, the emperor dismissed Suganami. But Evans is certain that friendships her father developed gained him an early warning by which he was able to make the fateful calls to his family.

Suganami failed to convince the emperor to surrender, but he gained appreciation from the Allies who evidently warned him about the pending bomb drop; and he avoided prison when General Douglas McArthur came to oversee the occupation of Japan.

Rieko's sister married a McArthur aide, a Japanese-American.

While McArthur put the emperor's inner circle and all the highly placed military leaders in prison, he did not imprison Suganami — a distinction that bothered his wife until she died at age 104. She felt it would have been more honorable and befitting his rank as a major general to have gone to prison.

Still, Suganami lost his high status and made a living basically as a private tutor until he died at age 66. He already struggled for full inclusion into the inner circles because he was a Catholic Christian and did not see the emperor as a god as did the vast majority of his other subjects.

A graduate of Seijo University in Tokyo, Rieko is an American citizen, who came to Los Angeles under sponsorship of an American couple. She had court reporter training and was very independent — unusual for a Japanese woman. Most Japanese women who graduated from university in Japan and came to the United States to seek opportunities after the war returned to Japan to marry.

After five years in Los Angeles, Rieko passed her tests for citizenship. Even today she cheers when a Japanese airplane is shot down in WWII war movies, so confesses she must be "fully American."

She retains a tremendous appreciation for America's helping to rebuild the decimated cities after the war ended.

Her father's advocacy for surrender is well known in Japanese history. But his position was not shared even by his brothers, and their disagreement is both part of Japanese history and part of discomfiting family lore.

Rieko married Joseph Evans — a "CIA master spy" who specialized during the Cold War in Soviet counterintelligence — at age 46 and moved to New Bern. Although she was young during the Second World War she retains several vivid period memories.

She remembers her father returning home from London with a suitcase full of milk chocolate bars. She also remembers that he shared them with neighbors, which she did not like one bit.

She remembers her mother and sister going into the fields and returning with an armful of potatoes; of the emperor announcing over the radio while they huddled in an underground bunker that Japan was surrendering. It was the first time most Japanese had ever heard his voice.

She remembers walking to church through the meadow with her father. Her mother and one sister never became Christian. Her father's Bible is

heavily marked and underlined.

She remembers that photographs of a man and woman together were prohibited during the war; likely to keep relationships from being used to weaken the resolve of a war captive. Her mother kept the children in the house during the anniversaries of the bombs dropping.

She remembers working in California and a customer refusing to be served by “a Japanese” person. She remembers being told so many times that an imperial military officer’s wife and children were not to cry that when her husband of 24 years died it was four months before sobs finally broke through her reserve.

In New Bern she attended the Catholic Church for many years but had friends at First Baptist. When her husband was ill she started attending First Baptist, where many others soon befriended her, including missionaries to Japan Herschel and Elizabeth Johnson.

The Johnsons were forced to retire from the Southern Baptist International Mission Board when they refused to sign their support of the Baptist Faith and Message. Rieko was baptized two years ago.

Tsunami pain

Rieko said the samurai spirit of Japan keeps them from seeking or appreciating outside help, even in times of direst need. But if Japan can rebuild from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, she is certain they can recover from the twin terrors of earthquake and tsunami that struck hard in March.

She tries to find out through personal connections how cousins and family friends are getting on after the disasters. She gets little feedback.

“They are not talking,” Rieko said. “That’s another Japanese trait. They don’t spill any bad news.”

One of Rieko's best classmate's sons is working near the crippled nuclear reactor. While other heroic workers volunteered for almost certainly suicidal turns to disarm the reactors and prevent holocaust, Rieko's classmate says simply about her son, "He's fine."

She has visited the Pearl Harbor Memorial, where she felt "very awkward."

While others may have noticed that she was Japanese, none could have known that her father tried his hardest to convince his emperor to surrender and avoid the nuclear holocaust that still haunts human history.

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