

Survival

Survival, my story about filming in Nagasaki by Isabelle Townsend.



Peter Townsend – Photo by Godfrey Argent

October 1941, somewhere off the east coast of England. My father could no longer feel the toes of his left foot. Despite the adrenaline, a feeling of terror had invaded both his legs. Meanwhile, the right wing was banging against the cabin of his Hurricane as it plummeted towards the sea. The burning engine coughed in fits and starts. He extricated himself and crawled to the opening. He remembered the taste of the cigarettes that had soothed him a little before settling into his cockpit. It was new or never. With speed and composure, he found the handle of his parachute. He closed his steel-blue eyes and breathed in all the will he had left. He jumped, his body curled towards the light of the benevolent skies. "Life, death, it's such a small thing" he thought. He caught his breath and his ears whistled. He let himself float for a long moment, grateful, forgetting the urgency. Then he yanked the handle and was violently sucked upwards. He was no longer in control, released into the hands of an unknown destiny. Only the sea would decide. He looked up as his parachute deployed and remembered the moment when he had lifted the petticoat of Betty's dress, his classmate. He had been severely punished. The air on his cheeks, which had become as hot as when he was on the luggage rack of Miss Taveer's bike, his schoolteacher, holding her slender waist with his little arms as she pedalled did not leave him indifferent. Between sky and sea, he could no longer feel his legs, just a warmth around his left foot. His boot must have filled with blood, he thought. His body was as numb as when the older boys at his boarding school had beaten him up for not having recited King's poem "If" without making a mistake. A rite of passage for all the new boys. No time to be afraid. He was heading for the sea and had back from shouting to empty his soul of all the humiliation and suffering. He thought of his father, whom he had refused to see on his deathbed because he wanted to keep alive the image of the good, taciturn man who was a gymnastics champion. The sea was closing in. He was going to be swallowed up in it like Phocion in the mouth of the whale. "That was my favourite story," he thought. "Mum told it so well." She would whisper it to him slowly, caressing his forehead with her silken hand. Suddenly, he could see the water and remembered that he was a good swimmer. "No worse than a cold shower in the morning," he said to himself. "I can't see a thing. Give me your hand. Give me some air. I'm scared. I can breathe. I am alive."

On 9 August 1945, the city of Nagasaki was already in full swing. It was 7.30 am and Sumitru Taniguchi was getting up slowly. It was already hot. His legs were aching from pedalling a bike that was too big for him. He puts on the blue and white short-sleeved shirt that he had carefully laid out next to his tatami mat the day before. He looks good in his cap with his black bag slung over his shoulder. His grandmother has prepared a lunch box with two sandwiches. He's so proud to be coming home and to be able to give her some of it. He savours the feeling of freedom that his job gives him. Standing on his pedals, he heads towards the neighbourhood where he meets his friends. He looks up. The sky is overcast. "Hello Sumitru! See you tomorrow." "I've still got a lot of mail to deliver," he says to himself. He gets back on his bike and waves. Suddenly, everything around him disappears in a blinding flash, whiter than white. With a deafening roar, the earth begins to shake. He is thrown violently from his bike, his small body slammed to the ground, gasping for breath. He looks up, stunned, his eyes full of dust. A thin trickle of blood runs down his neck. All is flame and darkness. He doesn't know whether he's dead or alive.



Photo: The Postman from Nagasaki Film Partners / Ayumi Sakamoto

8th August 2018. I can barely make out the sea in the night. The Shinkansen speeds along the coast. It slows down gradually as it approaches Nagasaki and makes its way into the station, submitting the ultimate destination; I feel like I'm arriving at the end of the world. My excitement is at its peak because I know how fond my father was of this city. He spent a long time there in August 1982, for his book project on the story of Sumitru Taniguchi. He was sixteen years old when he was thrown from his bicycle while delivering mail on 9th August 1945 at 10.02. He never saw his friends again, when he greeted every day in the Sumiyoshi district, where he was struck by a rock in the back. His skin was in tatters, and he was horribly burnt, but miraculously he had survived. My father saw in him extraordinary courage and determination. He admired the man he had become, this angel of peace who had never considered himself a martyr but a messenger, an awakener of conscience. Always dignified and humble, living with suffering beyond imagination. The train door opens with a metallic clang, and I'm invaded by the heavy heat, which I decide to tame, as well as the omnipresent sound of the crickets. At the end of the platform, I see Mika Kawase and her team, with whom I am going to film the documentary, "The Postman from Nagasaki". It's essential for me to be here. I must understand why my father chose to write this story. Everything he saw here, I'll see too. The languid hills that stretch endlessly in the white light of summer. The aim of the sea that separates the districts of the city where the port is located, once colonised by the Portuguese and the Dutch.

When I found myself early the next day at the top of Mount Inasa, I could easily imagine that he had been dazzled by the shape of the coastline around the city, that he had taken a moment to understand its geography. Once he'd arrived at the Hypocenter Park, he would have sat down on a bench, without saying a word, to consider the immensity of the tragedy. He would have lost himself in the streets of the Sumiyoshi district where Sumitru-san had last seen his friends.



Peace Park, Nagasaki August 8 2018 – Photo by Isabelle Townsend

August 8th 2018. At the bottom of the steps of the Peace Park, teachers from schools were collecting candles. Each one was decorated with a drawing and a message. I could hear music in the distance, like a sort of school choir. My soul filled with joy; I was transported by the atmosphere of contemplation. Night fell, as soon as I reached the top of the steps, a young man handed me his business card and said: "Would you like a candle? I sat down at a table to decorate it, then placed it next to thousands of others along the path. On the visiting card, one side read in Japanese and the other in English, his name, then "grandson of an atomic bomb victim, messenger of peace for the future, pray for peace with me." August 9th 2018. It's dusk. A procession is getting ready in front of Urakami Cathedral, its two towers towering into the navy blue sky. Torch in hand, I join a group of people to walk through the illuminated streets of the city. I keep looking for traces of life that he might have witnessed. He would have taken the tram. Not for long, knowing him. He would have sat among the passengers, observing them with curiosity and politeness. I can see him at the bottom of the 200 steps that Sumitru-san climbed every day with his red bicycle to get home. Was he as out of breath as I was when we got up there in front of the little Shinto temple, Karasawa? Had he felt, as I did, a burning desire to stay there, to contemplate the beauty of the moment in this spiritual refuge created by the local inhabitants? He used to say, "It is a garden that I feel closest to God". Here, where nature reigns supreme in its simplicity and delicacy, God could be seen around every corner. Mika's nimble camera follows me as I cross the Urakami River, jumping from rock to rock before sitting on one to listen to a recording from my father's last trip there in 1982. I'd found them in a shoebox among the piles of documents in his office. His voice sounded tired. The dragonflies with their enchanting wings came to a halt on the surface of the water and scrutinised me. I suddenly had the silly idea that one of them might be his reincarnation.

I walked tirelessly along the path of my own discoveries, guided by his voice, which contained all the substance of what he saw. For him, his job as a writer was to bear witness. Having fought in the Second World War, he was revolted by the death of innocent victims, particularly children. To write about the atomic horror, he needed to feel the city. Nagasaki, intoxicatingly spiritual. He had spent hours questioning Sumitru-san, with the indispensable help of the interpreter Noburu Tasaki. I wish I could have been there to listen to these shy, modest men, struggling to get by in English and Japanese. My father recorded the translation. Every word, every movement was an invitation to inspire his story. Thirty-six years later, in this very room, I discovered an altar dedicated to the memory of Sumitru-san, who had died the previous year. Photographs, letters, garlands and candles encouraged prayers and meditation, as if to keep the deceased alive for longer. However deep his faith, my father was not religious. Had he also gone to pray in the mosquito-infested forest with a descendant of a persecuted Christian family? I couldn't help but draw parallels with the harm the Hibakushas, survivors of the atomic bomb, had felt all their lives. I discovered a cemetery that bore a striking resemblance to the one where my Catholic grandparents were buried near Ulège in Belgium. The gravestones were of grey marble, contrasting with the cheerful boat that Sumitru-san's family had built to carry his soul into the next life.

August 14th 2018, Sotoma. I take off my shoes and run across the hot sand to the abandoned tree trunk on the beach. More beautiful than a sculpture in an art gallery, I thought. My clothes are sticking to my skin. I really want to take them off and jump into the water. The camera is ready, I'm blinded by the liquid horizon. I'm looking for shade, unlike my daughters, who strut around in the water like play-hungry fish, acrobats and accomplices. I prepare to read the passage from the book that has disturbed me. I can feel the drops of sweat on my back. My shirt soaks them. It sticks to my skin. A doctor told me that Sumitru-san died of summer. His burnt skin looked like poppies. His pores were non-existent and he could no longer perspire. He had lived for years with a body that was no longer his own. He'd had to tame it, deeply bruised, always in pain, between life and death. A shattered back with no hope of healing. I remembered the photo on my father's desk. The man with the burnt back. When Sumitru-san himself had come to this beach with his children, he had removed his shirt in an act of bravery, asuming his body. He had taken the hands of his two children firmly and led them towards the life-saving water. They weren't yet at the age where the other person's gaze counts, but they could feel the questioning eyes on them. Only a few more metres before the tender skin of their little feet touched the water, before their father, this hero, plunged into the foam to submerge his entire being.



Photo: The Postman from Nagasaki Film Partners / Ayumi Sakamoto

August 15th 2018, Nagasaki. The time had come to say goodbye. His family had been preparing for this for a long time. Together, they had built the Shorabune that would carry Sumitru-san's soul to another life. The boat reminded me of a diminutive Noah's Arc. It was decorated with garlands of thousands of small colourful cranes, a symbol of peace, as well as drawings and photos. His soul had returned to his family. It was the Obon ceremony. Paper lanterns illuminating the summer night had guided it on the path to its new life. I had accompanied his daughter and son in the procession, to the rhythm of the gong, through the hot, humid streets, smoked by the jubilant fireworks. I wiped drops of sweat from my cheeks. They mingled with tears of joy. I'd been touched by this kind of spirituality. By this hopeful simplicity. This had been Sumitru Taniguchi's final journey. Later that night, at a crossroads, I moved away, out of respect for the intimates. Suddenly I was worried that I would never see his daughter Sumie again. I turned around and ran off, happy and free, into the deserted town, lit up by the fireflies of hope. When I saw her in the distance, I called out to her loudly, by her first name. She turned and ran towards me. She took my hands in hers. "See you soon!" I giggled, fighting back tears. She gave me her business card. Saying goodbye to Sumitru-san was like finding my father again. He had come back into my life. His soul more alive than ever. I could hear him saying to me "hello my darling, welcome to Nagasaki."

December 11th 2021, home. I had discovered the power of transmission. A kind of state of grace that you surrender to, that lifts your soul and gives you a deeper understanding of the human being. It awakens tolerance and inspires the desire to build a better world. When one we ever going to stop the wars? I opened my eyes to the madness and cruelty of mankind. Since then, my conscience has been animated by new convictions. It is taking root in new horizons. As my daughters leave home on their own journeys, I'm stronger than ever to show them the way.

Isabelle Townsend

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Isabelle Townsend

Born and raised in France, Isabelle Townsend is a model, actress, storyteller, writer and producer. Following a worldwide modelling career in the 80's, Isabelle signs an exclusive contract with designer Ralph Lauren. She begins her acting career in Joel and Ethan Coen's film "Barton Fink" which wins the Palme d'Or in Cannes in 1991. After the birth of her first daughter, she creates an interactive theatre project in English for French schools and shares her passion for the Performing Arts with young people by directing workshops and plays. Isabelle joins Inna Brook's Dream Theatre company and tours in theatres throughout Europe.