

Emily Strasser on her book *Half-Life of a Secret*

(As published in The Oak Rider's Historically Speaking column the week of April 10, 2023)

I am pleased to bring you Emily Strasser's story about her search to learn about her grandfather, George Strasser. She only knew him by a photograph that hung in a nook of the house on Watts Bar Lake showing George in front of a mushroom cloud. In her book, *Half-Life of a Secret*, this photograph haunts her for years as she recalls it and tries to relocate it.

She also goes to great depths of research over a 10-year period to learn the most details possible about her grandfather. She uncovers facts that were well hidden and not talked about in the family or in his business relationships.

I am proud to have been able to give her some help through answering questions about Oak Ridge history and by putting her in touch with people who could help her in the research. You will see a view of Oak Ridge from someone who only knew the details through her determined digging and unfailing hope to learn exact details of what went on in Oak Ridge, especially Y-12, and exactly what role her grandfather played in it all. Be prepared to be surprised by what she learned about us!

As a child, I spent summers at my grandmother's house on Watts Bar Lake. Oak Ridge was just the place where we sometimes went to pick up pizza from Big Ed's. My dad, Dale, might drive us past his old schools or houses, and I would marvel a bit to think of my father as a kid. One day when it was too rainy to swim, we drove into town and went to the science museum. It was pretty cool to touch that glass globe and feel all my hair rise on end.

I had no idea what Oak Ridge was all about, but I did hear strange stories—my dad collecting lightning bugs to sell to the Lab, my cousins joking about seeing barrels of nuclear waste left to rust in parking lots, my aunt recalling security agents quizzing her college friends before she took a summer job at Y-12. My dad liked to joke about “the Myers-Briggs of Oak Ridge:” engineers, biologists, chemists, and physicists.

My grandfather, George Strasser, died before I was born. I can't tell you exactly when I learned that he'd worked on the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge, but by high school, I knew. I recall sitting in my 10th grade American History classroom as we studied the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, horrified to think that my grandfather had contributed to violence on such a massive scale.

It was strange to me that I'd heard very little of that history growing up, that I knew very little about my grandfather at all. He was a somewhat shrouded figure in my family. I did know that he'd struggled with mental illness later in life, but we talked about that only clinically. There was some echo to me in the muted way we talked about George's work and his mental health. Both were treated as unremarkable.

As I was about to graduate college and set off into adulthood, I became more interested in Oak Ridge and in George. I was trying to understand who I was and where I had come from. George and Oak Ridge felt like missing pieces of that puzzle.

So, I started reading. I checked out every book about Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project that I could find in my college library. I asked my father and aunts and uncles what they knew. I spoke to family friends who'd known George. I was hungry to learn everything I could about the Secret City, about my grandfather's role, and about how both had affected him, my family, and the world. I wanted to understand the human and environmental toll of the bomb. I didn't know that I had set off on a journey that would last more than ten years.

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Along the way, I spent hours in archives. I submitted Freedom of Information Act requests. I pored over governmental reports. I visited and revisited Oak Ridge. I went out to Nevada and toured the Nevada Test Site. I spoke to everyone I could find who'd known my grandfather. I was lucky, early on, to connect with Ray Smith, who over the years has been kind enough to answer many in-the-weeds questions about Oak Ridge history and to connect me to other knowledgeable people.

In August 2015, on the 70th anniversary of the first atomic bombing, I visited Hiroshima. Atomic bomb survivors, hibakusha, told me of the horrors of that day. Their stories will stay with me forever. A young woman tried to cool her father's burns with grated cucumber and potato, but the wounds festered, became infested with maggots, and he died within days. Days after the bombing, she learned that her mother's body had been burned at a site of mass cremation. A boy who lost both of his parents became one of thousands of "A-bomb" orphans left to fend for themselves in the destroyed city. They sucked stones and chewed newspaper to stave gnawing hunger. Many died on the streets or joined gangs to survive.

I have heard the arguments that justify the bombing as a necessary evil. I respond to those arguments in my book. But at the end of the day, I do not think anything justifies the targeting of a civilian population. Even some of the scientists who worked on the bomb, including some at Oak Ridge, opposed its use when they signed a petition to President Truman urging him to publicly demonstrate the weapon on an uninhabited island and give Japan a chance to surrender.

When we talk about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we cite estimated casualties—perhaps more than 200,000 from August through the end of 1945—but we often do not think of the suffering of the survivors, both physical and psychological. Many have lived lives in fear of developing cancer or other latent health effects. Many were discriminated against—people didn't want to marry hibakusha for fear that their children would be born with genetic effects, and employers didn't want to hire workers who might later sicken. American scientists and doctors at the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission treated survivors as research subjects rather than patients.

My grandfather never confronted the suffering and devastation of Hiroshima. I do wonder whether some part of him knew, and whether that knowledge contributed to his emotional unraveling, but to find out more about that, you'll have to read the book. I went to Hiroshima to face what he could not.

Now, Hiroshima is a thriving and beautiful place, but it took decades for the city to recover. Today, the hibakusha who share the stories of the most traumatic day of their lives do so in hopes of inspiring international peace and nuclear disarmament. I told the survivors I spoke to who my grandfather was, and they welcomed me with incredible kindness. They trusted me, granddaughter of a man who helped build the bomb that slaughtered their families, with their stories, and they asked me to carry their messages back to my country, to my people.

Nuclear weapons should be abolished. I do not believe they make us safer—as we saw with Trump and Kim Jong-un, and as we now see with Putin, the world is endangered when an irrational actor heads a nuclear-armed country. And we know, too, the threat of non-state actors getting ahold of a nuclear weapon or nuclear materials. Nor do I believe that my country's perceived safety should come at a cost of existential threat to others. As long as nuclear weapons exist, we face the possibility of another Hiroshima, another Nagasaki, or worse. My mother, an anti-nuclear activist, met George only once, shortly before his premature death. He told her he thought no country should possess nuclear weapons, including the US. Maybe then, near the end, he did begin to face the consequences of his work.

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When we think about the impacts of nuclear weapons, we also have to think about the environmental contamination and health effects caused by their manufacture and testing, here in Oak Ridge, out at the test sites in Nevada and the Pacific, and around the world. My grandfather loved this place and loved this land. He built his home here and raised his family here. And I learned in my research that he was devastated by his role in contaminating the land and water through the massive mercury releases from lithium isotope separation. I wonder how many more were privately tortured.

I love my family, and I love this land. I wrote this book out of this love. I now understand my grandfather as a troubled and complicated man. I can have empathy for his suffering even as I condemn the work he did. In the course of my research, I learned things about my grandfather that not even his children knew. My family has always supported me in this work. They have thanked me for speaking of hard parts of George's life that have been hidden. They do not all agree with my assessment of this history, but they have listened with open hearts. I believe that truth-telling can be an act of love and I am grateful it has been received as such.

I know that some people, or many people, who read my book will not agree with me, but I hope they will remain open. I believe that history should tell true stories that include the most dark and painful elements. Only then will we have a foundation on which to build a more just future.

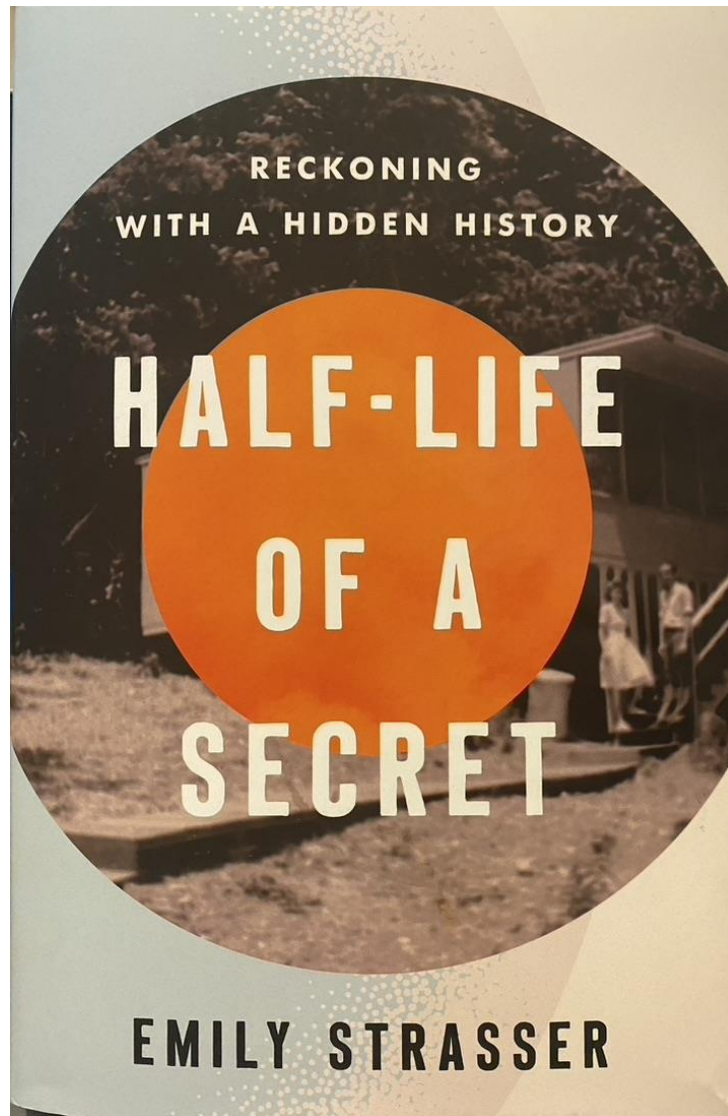
I'm grateful to Ray Smith for giving me this space to share a little about my book, *Half-Life of a Secret: Reckoning with a Hidden History*. If you want to learn more, I welcome you to my talk at the Oak Ridge Public Library at 2:00pm on April 14th, where I'll be interviewed by my father and Oak Ridge son, Dale Strasser, about my process of researching and writing about his father.

Thank you, Emily Strasser, for taking 10 years to research and write a most meaningful reflection on Oak Ridge's past. A past that but for you may never have seen the light of day. Your precise description of things your grandfather did at Y-12, such as the COLEX process, is accurate and informative, maybe more so than has been done before. The research into the mercury issue, precisely that of the transformation of elemental mercury and divalent mercury into methylmercury is alarming and must be understood to assure proper care is taken.

Your visit to Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Nevada Test Site allowed you to expand your knowledge base significantly with a keen eye on how Oak Ridge and your grandfather's work at Y-12 fit into the overall nuclear weapons picture. The result is a book filled with explicate and refreshing detail yet with a compassion of understanding for George Strasser that serves to comfort you and those of us who read *Half-Life of a Secret* in that we see a broader picture of the Manhattan Project and the Cold War through your eyes. Your exceptionally clear thinking and well written story goes where no other research has taken us. Thank you again!

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Half-Life of a Secret – Reckoning with a Hidden History is the story of Emily Strasser seeking to know her Grandfather, George Strasser

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Emily Strasser, the granddaughter of George Strasser who was a manager at Y-12