

MYOSHU SASAI (1-1-1-1)

T: Rev. Sasai, what is your age?

S: I'm 76 now.

T: Are you an issei? Are you from Japan?

S: Yes, I'm from Hyogo prefecture.

T: How many were in your family?

S: I had a lot in my family. We had eight in our family. I was the fifth son.

T: Where did you receive your education?

S: I went through the expected schools. My last school was Koyasan University. Koyasan University is the Shingon university.

T: When did you come to to Hawaii?

S: Seven years before the war started.

T: What were you doing on Dec. 7, 1941--the day the war started?

S: In Hilo, there was a Japanese language school called Dokuritsu Gakko. They were planning to have a bazaar that day. I had a child that was attending its kindergarten. So, I was committed to help the school. My wife was at the school. I was here (Hilo Shingon Mission. I wasn't doing anything in particular when the news came in. I was shocked. I think the bazaar broke up when the word got around.

T: How did you get word that the war had started? Was it over the radio?

S: It was originated on the Big Island. It was probably the radio. It wasn't a special news bulletin, it was a broadcast that would have been understood by all the people on Hawaii. It was a normal news broadcast.

T: What did you feel when you heard the news?

S: I have not had the experience of war to compare it with. I did feel it was a disasterous event. I knew that it could lead to my internment.

T: How were you arrested?

S: Since I felt that I might be arrested, I tried to figure what would be valuable to me while in custody. I thought clothing would be important. I would need strong and long-lasting clothing--things that would not tear. I was making new clothes. That night, Dec. 7, I slept in a small room in the back. It was not a bedroom. I don't know why I did those things, but I guess I knew naturally. I put my new clothes on a hanger nearby.

T: You felt that something was going to happen...

S: Intuition. When the war broke out in Europe, I heard of people being arrested there. I knew that arrests and confinement accompanied war. I didn't know precisely, but I was aware of the possibility. So, I was preparing for the eventual day. I knew that there was going to be a war. How, you might ask. We went from camp to camp giving sermons at night. An incident involving Japan happened, and it resulted in the national guard watching one of the bridges. It didn't phase me as I continued the night sermons, but the image of the guards watching the bridge remains. They came to get me that night.

T: Was it the FBI or the Hilo Police that came for you?

S: It was a Hilo police officer with two soldiers. I think the soldiers were from Kilauea Military Camp.

T: Did they give you a reason why they were taking you away?

S: No, there wasn't. No reason. The policeman who came to get me was a person that I knew really well. I had given him family counselling and even helped his family physically in some cases. They would have an argument, the husband and wife, and I would call them over and have a meal with them and make them shake hands. He came to get me.

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S: (cont.) The temple is large, but he knows where I am at. He didn't come in through the entrance. From downstairs, under the house, he rapped the floor. When I opened the door, he said "Sasai-sensei, please come with me." I told him to wait while I washed my face. I told my wife to bring me a towel and a little bit of money. She gave me \$20, a toothbrush, toothpaste and a towel before leaving.

As I looked there was a bus. It one of the olden buses...it's not like today's big buses. It was one of Hilo's sampan buses which only 10 to 15 people could ride. We got on and made numerous stops picking up other people. I didn't know where we were going. The other people on the bus were Japanese that I frequently talked to. We were all wondering where we were going. Someone said that we were going to Volcano. We did go to Volcano--Kilauea Military Camp.

We were the first busload. They brought us to a large room with beds lined up and with lockers. It must have been ten or eleven when we got there. We couldn't sleep. There were more and more people coming in throughout the night. By morning, there were over 100 people in the barrack.

The soldiers were not Hawaii people. They were from the mainland. The head man, a second lieutenant--very serious and young--who was a pleasant person, really took good care of us.

On the other side of the barracks was a mess hall. We went there for breakfast. From the barracks that we were in to the mess hall, soldiers were lined up in two columns. We had to walk between the two columns to get to the mess hall. I thought that war is really a harsh thing. The soldiers were just doing their jobs, but to us it was a shock.

We got to the mess hall for breakfast. Everything expected was there...tables, chairs. There was plenty of food. They had things that we never saw or tasted before. There was plenty of it. Milk, cereal, eggs, fruits--a lot of food. Japanese are used to having only chazuke for breakfast. We never had the luxury of having a feast for breakfast. They really fed us well. But outside, around the mess hall, soldiers were surrounding us. They were armed with fixed bayonets. It seemed harsh, but I thought war was a harsh thing anyway.

We could eat all that we wanted to. If they ran out of something, all we had to do was to raise our hand. The mess hall personnel would bring us what we desired. It was harsh, but we had our needs taken care of.

When we had to use the toilet, five or six guards would accompany five or six of us to the bathroom. One on one. When we seated ourselves, the guards would stand on a side. They were there on orders and not trying to harass us. That was the first experience like that in my life...being guarded by soldiers while I was using the toilet...armed soldiers with fixed bayonets at that. I was thirty four or thirty five then. I was not in fear of anything then. I would do things without too much forethought. No fear or worries. I think the older people had some fear. I was at that age when the lack of money, work, or hardships did not scare me.

More and more people would come into the camp. I wondered how the war was progressing and how Hilo was doing. I was interested in finding out if there were any developments and would ask the new people about it as they came into camp. But the new people were afraid of the situation that they were in and would not tell us anything. They wouldn't talk. I was taken on the first night, but the other who came in later were familiar with the rules that they

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S: (cont.) were not to say anything. They were afraid of spreading rumors. I wanted to find out a lot of things from the new people but could not find out of any new developments. We began living in different worlds; our world was separated from that of the other people on the island of Hawaii. That was the kind of feeling that was going on at that time.

We were there December and January. We spent New Year's there. In February, they began hearings on the second floor of the post office in Hilo. They used to take us in groups of four to five people to the hearings. One would go there for three or four trips. They formed these hearing councils consisting of soldiers and lawyers and a haole big shot from Hilo. They would conduct the hearings. We could call in our lawyers if we wanted too. It was different from a trial in the sense that they only asked us questions. They said it would be probably be a waste to call in our lawyers for these hearings. They only wanted to ask us a few questions. They would not ask us any questions that would be out of the ordinary. We had to go two or three times.

It didn't matter what went on in the hearings. I only thing I was happy about was leaving the military camp and seeing the outside world. The path we would travel would be the route that I took for my evening sermons. I became acquainted with many people during those sermons and I was wondering and looking for a familiar face, but no one was out. (Laughs) That was my only pleasure.

While at the hearings, friends and family would crowd the corridors to peer through the windows to get a view. My wife and child came to see me. That was the greatest enjoyment for me. Once the hearings were finished, we could not leave the barracks area. My enjoyment would be gone. We would just pass time away there.

Later on two FBI agents came. They told us that we would be moved to the mainland. They didn't know when, but if we had something to say to our families, they would relay the message. Those who had businesses and needed power of attorneys would have a notary public come to document the necessary papers. Since I didn't have anything to fill out, it was just a matter of fact to me. When we were to move, they gave us a two-day notice. They sent out notices to the families through the police. This guy named Richardson from the Hilo Police Department let our families know of our departure.

In order to prepare for our move, the families went out to buy us warm clothes. We needed suitcases, hats, gloves and on and on. I imagine that the stores in Hilo must have ran out of their stock for those items then. Richardson would haul in all these things for us. He was by himself. There were other policemen under him that assisted.

The soldiers were from the mainland and not familiar with the local people, while the police were. As a result of knowing that we really didn't do anything wrong and their acquaintance with us, they treated us royally. In due time, the families came to visit us. They were able to come into the barracks and say their farewells.

Aside from the businessmen who had to get their shops in order for their absence, we really didn't have too much to say besides take care of yourselves and stay well. The talks were long, but that's what it boiled down to.

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S: (cont.) They loaded us into Army trucks for Hilo port. It was a military convoy with strict orders to travel at 35 mph. All the vehicles travelled at the same rate of speed whether it be a straight road or curves.

It was nostalgic going through Hilo town. We were hoping to see people that we knew, but unfortunately couldn't see anyone. We finally got to the port. We got aboard the Waialaiaiei to Honolulu. It was a scary trip. Normally the ocean is pleasant, but in war time, the ocean is scary. You don't know what is in it. We slept on board that night. The following morning, we got out on the top deck to see the town of Hilo as we departed. It's sad when you have to leave your family behind.

We were on the upper deck. Below us were Japanese boys from Hawaii who had just volunteered for the military. The father is on the top while the son is on the lower deck. Both are being taken away, but their destinations are different. That when my feeling settled.

Boys born in Hawaii, young boys from Hawaii are going. Even though their citizenship may be different, they are on their way. We are going someplace too. I thought that we were all being forced to go. "But, priest, you're going; so we'll go too." Japanese are funny sometimes. My going was expected. That's when I realized that my going was to be expected.

Honolulu was terrible. Every morning the bugle would sound. It reminded me that it was wartime with its blast. Even the food was bad. Pork and beand and sausage was the mainstay. They told us not to leave anything on the plate. We could eat all we wanted, but we couldn't throw anything out. Food was valuable. Just take what you can eat.

That was at the immigration station. All around us were the guards. They were all armed with small machineguns. Over here, the soldiers carried rifles. At Honolulu, it was all machineguns. We were there for a while. Later, we went to Sand Island.

Sand Island was also pretty bad. We had to strip down, naked. Then we had to bring our clothes from here to there...They were just playing games with us...that was also a part of war. Also when we ate, they would not let us use forks or knives...just spoons. The food wasn't bad. They had steak sometimes, but we had to eat it with a spoon.

Since it was the place of the Pearl Harbor attack, the flames were still burning. Honolulu was terribly harsh. It think it was close to April, I can't remember the exact day, I was sent to San Fransico aboard a Army transport. It took a long time. We were placed in the hold which was pitch black. Before that they must have had Army approval. A Japanese lawyer from Honolulu who was accompanied by other dignitaries, came aboard and said if there was anything that he could do for them, he would do it. If we wanted to write a letter to our families, we should write. He would deliver them. I wonder if he is still living? His name was Marumoto, Shoji.

T: Masaji.

S: Yes, Masaji. He treated us well. I wrote a letter to my child. I still remember it. Listen to your mother. Eat a lot and grow big. That letter was promptly delivered.

The ship kept constantly dark. They wouldn't allow us to use the bathroom. They brought in barrels for us to use. But they would give us a number of cigarettes daily. The military moved on orders, they didn't do anything out of spite. It was regulations. They

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S: (cont.) were looking for volunteers to help in the mess hall as KPs. Since I was young, I volunteered.

T: There was no other way out of the hold...

S: I wanted to get out of the hold. The mess hall was quite a ways off. In side the ship, there were compartment doors that you had to open and close. There were one after another to get there. It was hot inside the ship. After we finished at the mess hall, we had to clean it up. We had to wash it. Then the sergeant would come to take us back. When he came, he would give us cigarettes. He would issue us five cigarettes each. We had a ration aboard the ship. He would give us cigarettes in addition to our supply. I don't think that it was the sergeants personal supply, but a reward that was issued. It was the cigarettes and since they let those who helped take a shower. The ship's shower was a steady drip of water.

I would bathe with my undershirt on. It was a way to combine doing my laundry and batheing. That was my motive. I can't forget that kind of thing.

When we were just about to reach San Francisco, I helped with lunch. We were reaching port and started our way up to the top deck. After a week of working together, the sergeant came to see us off. We shook hand and he said "Good luck for you." It was he that would face more dangers than us. With tears in his eyes, he wished us good luck. He left quite an impression.

There were a lot of hard things, but it never made me feel hateful. So I see the experience as being pretty good. If it had not happened, I still wouldn't know the mainland and would be still eating just chazuke.

During the mainland experience, I learned that the big shots, Hilo businessmen, didn't know anything. It was just the fact that they had a little money. They didn't know anything else. When we got to camp, we found out that we had to cook for ourselves. We had all the supplies and the stores were full, but no one would make a move to cook. We didn't know how to make American food, but we did know enought to boil this and fry that. The people who volunteered to help in the kitchen were only priests.

T: Were you able to bring anything beside your clothes to the camps?

S: Do you mean over here? We didn't have that kind of time. All I got was the please come with me. So all that I brought was a towel, toothbrush and toothpaste and \$20. Nothing besides that.

T: What about when you went to the mainland?

S: We had our clothing. They did not allow books or writing instruments. That what I can remember. When we went to the Mainland, they issued a barracks bag to store all our stuff into. We brought our suitcases, but during the inspection, we were forced to empty the suitcases and place whatever we could carry in the barracks bag. The suitcases came later.

The thing that we were worried about was the cold on the mainland. So care was taken to pack items that would keep us warm and items that would last for quite awhile since we didnt; know how long we would be there. Food wasn't really a concern. We didn't bring any books either. The books were brought in by the mainland people later.

T: When you got to camp, what kind of work did you do?

S: In the beginning, there was no work. All we did was just eat. We helped with the mess hall supplies. Since the truck brought in our supplies daily, we would help unload the truck and store

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S: (cont.) the good at the mess hall. We helped with the chores in the mess hall. Cooks, cooks helpers and KP. In the beginning that about all the jobs they had in the camps. Even at the camp in the volcano area, the lieutenant asked us for help.

There were many people in the barracks. The barracks would get dirty. We had to organize in order to keep it clean.

T: How did you spend your free time . We had room heaters that
S: need a constant supply of fire wood. That was the extent of the work. I think that was in Louisiana . They had some jobs lined up for outside work. They had a daily request for a number of people. I went on it. They had this large mountain that had a pine forest which they were clearing. We had to hapai the pine trees. They would say anything, but I was wondering why they were clearing the mountain of the trees. Was this helping the war effort? I wrote the Department of Justice for some answers.

A reply came. We didn't have to work on the mountain. It was a frank reply. That was the kind of work that we did. Another job that I had since I didn't have any money. They would give a coupon for ten cents a day. Ten cents wasn't enough. If we volunteered for work outside cutting grass or help clean some haole's house, they would pay us ten cents per hour. That's 80 cents a day. That's big money. So we cut grass and even helped as carpenters That was interesting. Surrounding the camp was barbed wire. In the four corners of the camp were watchtowers. We helped build the stairs to the watchtowers that were used to keep us confined. Still they would pay us the 10 cents per hour.

T: Were you free to worship your religion in the camps?

S: Worship was permitted. They did not touch religion. It was a good training ground for the priests. Young priests don't know anything. Human experience can be had only through living, and we had many respected elderly. Every week, they would alternate and teach us. Eventually my turn would come. I was still young and could not give a good sermon. Yet I would think hard about giving a sermon... It was a good training ground.

T: Were you able to communicate regularly with your wife through letters?

S: Yes, I was able to do that. But these letters had to go through a censor. We couldn't write mushy letters. We were forbidden to mention geographic locations and the exact number of things. It could say that we reached a certain camp on such and such day. The camp has so many people...that's the kind of things that we couldn't write about. We could write about inquiries about how she is doing, how the child is doing, is he a rascal and things like that. Everyone was waiting for their letters. That the their major source of pleasure. They would deliver letters every third or fourth day. If you missed a letter which they placed on your bunk, your nerves would act up. You may not show it on your face, but there would be an uneasy feeling. Letters were a big event. The letters couldn't change the situation any, but they would console the heart.

T: Were the number of letters restricted?

S: I think so, but they did not enforce the rule.

T: There wasn't anything about how often in a week?

S: I think there was something like that.

T: Did you call for your wife to come?

S: Yes, we had to send out a petition from this end. My wife also sent out her petition to rejoin me. This wasn't done on an individual basis but as a group. They finally approved the move to have the spouse join the internees. They moved us from the interment camp to the relocation centers. By that time, we were at Santa Fe, New

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- S: (cont.) Mexico. They sent us to Arkansas. Jerome. We stayed there a month and sent us to Tule Lake. Family and all.
- T: Even if your family joined you, did you find that the life at the camp unbearable?
- S: No. I was so happy that they joined me. I didn't have to do any work. Food was being supplied. They would give a little allowance. I shouldn't say it was a happy time in our lives because it was during the war, but it was carefree. We could learn whatever we wanted to. They had all kinds of classes. Drawing, singing...all kinds of classes.
- S: We learned folksongs.
- T: You didn't have any hardships or shortages in the camp?
- S: When I was at the men's camp, the Army supplied the medical attention. There was a hospital. So there were no worries there. At the relocation center, there were no set procedures. There were dentists and regular doctor who were in the camps. They provided their services at a clinic.
- T: So, there were no cases when you had needs.
- S: I didn't personally. But when we were going from Honolulu to San Francisco, there was a man in the same room who had bad ulcers. He needed an operation at that time. But he was forced to continue the trip. It was hard for him, but we couldn't do anything. Then there are cases when one just gives up. There was a case when a guy had a nervous breakdown and started climbing a fence. It was a double barbed wire fence. We had already climbed the inside fence and was shot and killed from the watchtower. That person lacked self discipline.
- T: How were you released from the camp?
- S: When I left Santa Fe for Jerome, I was partially being released. But we were among the group that wanted to return to Japan. So they sent us to Tule Lake. They did not let us go outside of the camp. When we were released from Tule Lake, it was after the end of the war. They already knew that we had done nothing wrong. They really took good care of us. They warned us against returning to Japan. There was no food...Japan is filled with hardships. They told us to stay in America.
- T: Who was telling you that?
- S: I think it was one of the camp officials.
- T: I heard that the Quakers were involved in that.
- S: They didn't come from outside the camp. There were camp personnel. They were really trying to be helpful.
- T: Weren't you in a quandry since you had decided to return to Japan?
- S: When I heard that Japan had surrendered, I accepted the fact. I believe many of those who were at Tule Lake had difficulties in making a judgement. They still believed that Japan had not lost the war. They returned to Japan.
- The parents cannot return to the U.S., but many of their children are presently living in Hawaii. A lot of the children are living here. It because, in harsh words, the parents were uneducated and couldn't make the right kind of decision. They just hung on their beliefs that Japan could not lose a war. They couldn't change their minds.