

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Evelyn Lyn Kagawa

now the devastation that it could do really. It didn't dawn on me that the house was completely wiped out until I went downstairs in the morning. And there was nothing, not even a stick, not even a button, nothing in the store. . . . People were very, very good. They came to help us; they brought us trucks to haul away whatever we could. We did find some material underneath all that mud and debris. The trucks took 'em out to Kolekole . . . and threw the material in at the top of the river and let it run down and let the water clean it. And then we laid it on the grass, the lawn over there, stretched out and dried it. And people came in to buy ten cents a yard, twenty-five cents a yard."

Evelyn Lyn Miyazaki Kagawa, nisei, was born June 22, 1922 in Tacoma, Washington. Her parents, Carl Shintaro Miyazaki and Matsuko Matsukawa Miyazaki immigrated to America from Kumamoto and Ehime prefectures, respectively.

Kagawa, the second of four children, was raised and educated in Tacoma, graduating from Stadium High School. She was attending the College of Puget Sound when World War II broke out. Carl Miyazaki, a leader in the local Japanese community, was picked up by the FBI and interned as an enemy alien at Santa Fe, New Mexico. Kagawa and her family, along with other Japanese Americans of the area, were taken first to an assembly center in Pinedale, California, then eventually to Tule Lake internment camp, where they were confined for twenty months.

At Tule Lake, she met Hideo Kagawa, a Hilo native who was interned while a student at Sacramento City College. They eventually relocated to Chicago, where Lyn worked as a nurse's aide in the University of Chicago School of Medicine. After they were married in 1946, Hideo was drafted into the U.S. Army. Lyn went to Minneapolis, Minnesota to live with her parents, who had relocated there after the war ended.

In 1951, Lyn and Hideo moved to Hilo to live. Hideo's family owned S. Hata Shoten, Ltd., a general merchandise store specializing in dry goods on Kamehameha Avenue in downtown Hilo. Lyn worked in the store, eventually becoming manager with her husband after her mother-in-law retired in the 1960s. Hideo Kagawa died in 1972.

Although the S. Hata Shoten, Ltd. building, which was made of concrete, survived the 1960 tsunami, all the store's merchandise and other contents were washed away. They were able to salvage some of the merchandise by washing them in a stream and drying them in a park.

Since closing the business in 1989, Kagawa lives in Hilo with one of her three children.

Tape No. 29-21-1-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Evelyn Lyn Kagawa (LK)

Hilo, Hawai'i

May 27, 1998

BY: Nancy Piianaia (NP)

NP: This is May 27, 1998, and I'm in Hilo with Mrs. Lyn Kagawa.

Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed, Lyn. What I would like to start with is, you can tell me when and where you were born.

LK: I was born in Tacoma, Washington. When? June 22, 1922.

NP: And could you give me the names of your mother and father and how they happened to come to Washington if you have all that information?

LK: My father [Carl Shintaro Miyazaki] was fourteen when he, I guess, emigrated from Kumamoto in Japan to Seattle, Washington, because he was converted to Christianity in Japan by these (chuckles) street missionaries. So he came as a schoolboy, worked his way through high school and business college. And then the owners of the Union Laundry that he was working for as an accountant thought he was a good man, I guess, and they introduced my mother—they went through her father, her parents—and promised that she would have a good life if she would come over and marry my father. So they got married in 1920.

NP: Nineteen twenty. Now how did he happen to become an accountant?

LK: He went to business college in Seattle after he went through high school; I think he was one of the first Japanese graduates of Broadway High School in Seattle. Worked for two dollars a month, (chuckles) room and board.

NP: So he came when he was fourteen without his family, all alone, and proceeded to learn English and . . .

LK: That's right.

NP: That's quite amazing. And what about your mom? What was her name and where did she come from?

LK: Her name was Matsuko Miyazaki, and Matsuko Matsukawa before she got married, and she came from Ehime-ken in Japan, and as I say, the proprietors of this laundry

that my father was being an accountant for—*shimpai* as they say—were the go-betweens, and got my mother married to my father.

I asked my mother one time, how in the heck she married Dad with all his faults, and she said because she didn't know his faults.

(Laughter)

NP: And she came with her family, did she?

LK: No. She came alone.

NP: Alone also. As a young woman, young girl?

LK: Mm hmm [yes]. Nineteen.

NP: Nineteen. It's amazing what courage people have.

LK: I know, what you can do. Yes. I would never have done that.

NP: Then they married in 1920, and settled in Tacoma?

LK: Yes. They had a branch laundry over there, so he went over there to manage that.

NP: Okay. And could you tell me how many brothers and sisters you had and what place you . . .

LK: I have one sister, who was left in Japan in 1922. I was born in June, and they went back to Japan in August because Grandfather said he was on his deathbed. But he wasn't, he just wanted my father to come back. (Chuckles) And they insisted that my sister stay there thinking that that would bring my father back earlier. So she stayed there, but I got to come back. So I didn't get to meet her until I was sixteen when she graduated high school in Japan, [and] my father went to get her and brought her back.

NP: Was that strange after not knowing?

LK: Yes. We were good friends. We never had a fight. I used to read her diary, though. She wanted to go back to Japan very badly because Grandfather and Grandmother raised her, and she was spoiled.

NP: Did she ever get to go back?

LK: Yes she did, after the war. So she went to high school, learned English—because math was the same anywhere else. She got married in an [internment] camp [during World War II]. She married someone who had the same type of background, who had gone to Japan for schooling, so they got along very well. And she lives in Denver now.

I have two brothers, younger than I. One is in Wisconsin, and one is in Minnesota. They are both retired by now.

- NP: So there were four children in your family?
- LK: Mm hmm [yes]. Two girls and two boys.
- NP: And your sister was the oldest?
- LK: Yes. She's a year older than I am.
- NP: You grew up in Tacoma. What was it like growing up? What kind of neighborhood did you live in?
- LK: It was nice. We were in a residential neighborhood, and I didn't know discrimination. It's funny, we had one Chinese family in the town and several Japanese families. They were mostly in service, laundries and markets and so forth. But no discrimination, I didn't feel any. Very few colored people, and some Indians. But I didn't feel discrimination until the war.
- NP: And when the war broke out in 1941, you were. . . .
- LK: I was eighteen.
- NP: Eighteen.
- LK: Something like that.
- NP: Okay, you had graduated from high school.
- LK: Mm hmm [yes].
- NP: Were you working at the time?
- LK: I was going to go to college.
- NP: Where were you planning on going to college?
- LK: CPS [College of Puget Sound]. Now it's not CPS anymore, it's University of Puget Sound, I think.
- NP: Okay, and then what happened?
- LK: War broke out, my sister couldn't speak any English—not well, anyway. My father was picked up on December 7. Because he knew English, he used to interpret for all these people who had all these licenses and automobile cases and stuff like that at court. And he was president of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce, of the [Japanese-]language school, and so forth, and so on. He was a big shot. So I understand, later, that they figured he would lead the Japanese community against the Americans. That's what they were afraid of, they said. So they picked him up first. And my mother didn't see him for twenty months. They put him in [an internment] camp.
- NP: Where was he sent?

- LK: He was sent to Seattle immigration, and then from there, when we went to see him, he was sent to Missoula, Montana. And from Missoula, Montana, to Lordsburg, New Mexico, and then to Santa Fe.
- NP: Do you know the name of the camp that he was at?
- LK: Lordsburg. . . . I don't know—just Lordsburg, I guess. And the week after he came back to camp, I shook the dust off of Tule Lake and took off. I never saw so many Japanese in my life, and I didn't like it.
- NP: This leads to your own experiences in camp.
- LK: To camp life, yes.
- NP: Before we start with that, do you have any recollections of that day and how you felt when he was picked up and how that was?
- LK: I wasn't home when my father was picked up. When I got home from a bowling tournament or something or other, the porch light was off, and my mother always leaves the porch light on for me until I come home. Then when I walked up the steps, she opened the door. "What in the world are you doing?" she said, "Come home, come home quick." I went inside, and she told me that my father was already picked up on December 7. One thing I do remember, she called someone for something or other, and that person said, "Please don't call me, your phone must be tapped." So we knew who our friends were. But we were evacuated. The only way we were notified was on the telephone (poles). They had posters saying, anyone of Japanese ancestry found here after May whatever the date was, will be imprisoned. And that was the only way. There was a camp right outside Tacoma where we used to have our state fair, Puyallup. We thought we were all going there. And it rains a lot and it's muddy there, so we packed galoshes and rain gear and so forth and so on. And we didn't go there. We were sent to California. People from California were sent up to the one in Washington. The army does crazy things. What I didn't like about the trip was that we were on an old, old train from Tacoma to Pinedale, California. And there were soldiers at each end of the car with bayonets. They were friendly, but they were there.
- NP: You definitely feel that you were not trusted.
- LK: So we went to Pinedale. We all had rain gear on, and it was hot, hot, hot. People just fell over and . . .
- NP: What month was this?
- LK: May. I know my brother fainted from the heat. And several people had gone to the hospital. But we were in barracks; we didn't know what that was like until we found out.
- NP: This is at Tule Lake?
- LK: No. This was at Pinedale assembly center.
- NP: Pinedale, okay.

LK: And then from Pinedale assembly center, we were sent to Tule Lake, and we stayed at Tule Lake twenty months, until my father was released.

They had that information release thing [i.e., Freedom of Information Act] passed recently so my kid brother wrote to Washington, D.C. and got some information from them. And he found out that my father had a trial in Missoula, Montana, and the panel there decided that he should be released; he wasn't going to sabotage, and he wasn't an enemy alien, that he was okay. But the FBI (J. Edgar Hoover's signature) said no, so he got sent on. We didn't know those things until now. We just found out.

NP: And if he had been released, would he have been sent back to the camp with you?

LK: Mm hmm [yes], to join the family. But interesting. They knew things, though, the FBI. I was amazed. I went to one of his trials, and they asked him—the training ships used to come from Japan to Seattle and Tacoma and everybody had welcoming parties for the Japanese training navy ships. My father, being boss, well, president or something or other, he picked up the admiral of the boat, and some big shots, and took them to a picnic. The FBI said, "What did you talk about in the car?" This was back in 1929. (Chuckles) So they had kept tabs, I was surprised at that.

NP: What happened to your home?

LK: My father had a lawyer, and he took care of the home. But when my parents went back after the war, they couldn't get back in. They had such a thing where the housing—they couldn't evict the people that were in there. So they stayed in the Japanese[-language] school; the Japanese-language school had many, many rooms. There were several families [staying] there at that time. And of course, they [LK's parents] didn't like it, so my kid brother, my younger brother, was in Macalester [College] in St. Paul, Minnesota. So he called them up, and they went out there after the war. But things we had put into the church, our own Methodist church, they were vandalized. The couches were slashed, the refrigerators were vandalized and so forth. So they had nothing left when they got back.

NP: So you had put everything in there for storage before you were moved?

LK: Mm hmm [yes], they said that we could do that. We had a lot of people come around, "You want five dollars for that? Ten dollars for that?" They'd just walk right into the house. They just made me so mad. Scavengers.

NP: A terrible time.

LK: It was. Mentally it was bad.

NP: You were in the camp for twenty months.

LK: Twenty months.

NP: With your mother and your sister and your two brothers, and you lived in—did you have a . . .

- LK: We lived in a barrack. I think there were six families in one barrack. And the rafters are open, so you can hear what everybody says in the next room. If you had more than five, I think you got two rooms. Potbelly stove and beds, and a mess hall. Two hundred and fifty people to a mess hall. Was interesting. My younger brother had fun because they went dancing, they had clubs, and they had groups and baseball games and so forth. But we weren't that happy about it.
- NP: What did you do most of the time?
- LK: They asked for assistance to help the teachers that used to come in. And they didn't have any [help] for the handicapped children. Nobody volunteered there, so I went there to help the handicapped kids. I got paid twelve dollars a month, I think. The doctors were paid sixteen; they were the highest paid at camp.
- NP: Did you suffer with the seasons? Was it freezing in the winter . . .
- LK: No, no, no. The weather was all right. Tule Lake was fine. We didn't have too much rain.
- NP: Did you have gardens?
- LK: No. You couldn't do anything like that. And the wire fence around with the towers and the bayonets.
- NP: But during this experience, however, you did have an encounter; you met your husband.
- LK: Yes. (Chuckles)
- NP: Can you tell a little bit about that?
- LK: I think, I don't know, somebody got in between and wanted me to meet him, and I said, "I don't want to meet anybody from Hawai'i."
- NP: (Chuckles) Why did you feel that way?
- LK: The Hawai'i boys had a reputation of being fighters. They wanted to pick a fight all the time. But there were two types of Hawaiian students in California: the ones that were merchant marines, they were rough and rugged; and then the kids who had gone over there to go to college. So I think the reputation preceded them on that. I met him, went dancing. And he went to Chicago to go to college over there, so I went there to college, too.
- NP: This was afterwards?
- LK: Mm hmm [yes].
- NP: What was his name and where was he from?

- LK:** His name was Hideo Kagawa, and his parents were—his grandfather was S. Hata, the one that built that building on Kam[ehameha] Avenue in 1912. And Mother[-in-law] was a Hata girl, and she bought back that building from the alien property custodian because they picked it up as alien property when war broke out. They owned it before the war, but when war started, alien property picked it up. She bought it back for [\$]100,000 in 1942. And she couldn't buy all the property that S. Hata owned; she could only buy back that one building. But they [previously] owned a brewery, they owned Moses Warehouse, and they had a house on Hālā'i Hill and so forth, but the alien property custodian took all that. So she bought the building back, and she ran the building. She separated [it] into different stores because (it) used to be all one store before. It was hardware, groceries, and dry goods. The whole building was used for S. Hata, but after the war, she couldn't use all of that, so she individualized it and rented it out to other people.
- NP:** This was before the 1946 tidal wave that she made those changes?
- LK:** Mm hmm [yes].
- NP:** And was her husband . . .
- LK:** Her husband was interned. (Chuckles)
- NP:** He was interned.
- LK:** In the Mainland. So she was doing this all by herself. She's a strong woman.
- NP:** Now why do you think he was interned?
- LK:** Because he was the head of the something or other—Japanese . . .
- NP:** Kendo or form of martial arts?
- LK:** No. I think they tried to pick up all the big shots. He was active in [the] community.
- NP:** Do you know if there were many people from Hilo who were interned?
- LK:** Yes. Quite a few of the fathers went. Some families went because they could go. They said that if the father was gone, they had no means of income. So [in some cases] the family followed them, wife and children. They could do that, but she didn't go.
- NP:** She stayed behind?
- LK:** Yes.
- NP:** And your husband-to-be was on the Mainland at school?
- LK:** That's right. He couldn't come back; there were no boats to come back, there were no airplanes at that time.

- NP: Where was he going to school?
- LK: Chicago.
- NP: Before?
- LK: Sacramento [City] College.
- NP: Sacramento [City] College. Okay, so he was picked up or he had . . .
- LK: He was interned, too, because he was on the West Coast.
- NP: Right. And your romance lasted through the (LK chuckles) trials and tribulations of the camp?
- LK: We were both in Chicago, so we had fun.
- NP: But, I mean, you spent some time in the camp?
- LK: Mm hmm [yes].
- NP: Now, you were not in the camp throughout the entire war?
- LK: No. I left. As soon as my father was released and came back, he could be the head of the family. My sister was older than I, but because of her inability to speak English well, I was technically the head of the family.
- NP: Oh, I understand.
- LK: As soon as my father came back, the week after he came back, I took off.
- NP: And you both went to Chicago.
- LK: He had gone to Chicago; he was going to school over there already.
- NP: Oh, I see.
- LK: I worked as a nurse's aide in the [University of] Chicago School of Medicine. The Quakers were very, very nice. They found us jobs and they found us places to stay, the people who would tolerate us.
- NP: Throughout the war, which must have been difficult.
- LK: Mm hmm [yes].
- NP: You were married during the war, were you?
- LK: No, after the war. He did his service and then he came back. Oh no, we got married because he got his notice, his draft notice.

- NP: That was in nineteen. . . .
- LK: September, 1946.
- NP: Okay, and you stayed; he went off.
- LK: Mm hmm [yes]. He went overseas, and he wanted me to go back and live with my parents while he was gone, so I had to go to Minneapolis and I lived there, went to the university there.
- NP: Your parents, in the meantime . . .
- LK: Had moved to Minneapolis to be with my brother.
- NP: And that was the reason they chose Minneapolis, then, after Tacoma?
- LK: Mm hmm. Yes.
- NP: And what did you do in Minneapolis?
- LK: Went to school. (Chuckles) I just went to the University of Minnesota. I lived with my mother, so there was nothing else I could do. I didn't work at all.
- NP: Your family had a lot of experiences . . .
- LK: (Chuckles) Yes.
- NP: Then your husband came out of the service.
- LK: We came back to Hawai'i once on a belated honeymoon, and then went back to school. He finished school. I didn't get to finish. I have two years of law school but no degree.
- NP: Time to do it.
- LK: (Laughs) My granddaughter's doing it for me now. She's getting her degree in California.
- NP: What was it like to come to Hawai'i in that first trip?
- LK: That first trip was, I don't know, how should I say? My mother said, "Are you sure you can go back that far?" At that time, in '46, it was far away. Hawai'i was on the other side of the world. And she said, "I'm not gonna see you until we die."
(Chuckles)
- NP: Oh, how sad.
- LK: She was very upset. But (the) minister asked me if I'm sure, and I said, "Yes, I'm positive." When I came [to Hawai'i] the first time, it was only to play, so it was all

right. But when we came back after he finished school, I knew I had to work.
(Chuckles) But I knew what I was getting into.

NP: How did you find Hawai'i when you made the first trip?

LK: How did I find it? I shouldn't use the word "tolerable," but I knew I could live here. There were several other girls who came back about that time, too. California girls that had married Hilo boys. And three of them that I know, went back. They didn't like it. But I was brought up in a Japanese family, and I guess maybe they weren't. They didn't like the Japanese customs. And I was used to that. Because we used to go to my mother for Japanese-language school homework, and my father for English homework. So my mother, we had to speak Japanese to; [to] my father, we had to speak English.

NP: So you were comfortable with the culture?

LK: Yes.

NP: And you perhaps knew what was ahead of you?

LK: That's it. That's right. That's a good way to put it. I knew I had to live with my in-laws. That, I knew, because that's custom; the oldest son has to take care of their parents.

NP: On this trip, do you feel that they were looking you over, too, and wondering . . .

LK: I do know they investigated, the way the Japanese do. They checked my family, my mother's family, my father's family.

NP: So before you were married?

LK: Yes. Before. I didn't know that until I came back. But my father-in-law was happy that I could speak Japanese.

NP: So you came back in [nineteen] fifty . . .

LK: [Nineteen] fifty-one.

NP: [Nineteen] fifty-one. Now just to backtrack just before this, I know you weren't there, but Hata's [S. Hata Shoten, Ltd.] was in the path of the 1946 tidal wave.

LK: Yes.

NP: Could you tell me a little bit about what the impact of that tidal wave was on the business and on the family?

LK: I don't know much about that one, but I do know that all the buildings that were on the other [i.e., *makai*] side of the street were leaning against our building apparently. Our building was concrete, and they were all washed away in the 1946 tidal wave. It must have been a hundred or so small little stores on the Kam[ehameha] Avenue side,

on the lower side. They didn't tell me they asked for help or anything like that; I didn't know whether they borrowed money from the bank or what. But after the 1960 one, Small Business Administration came in, and we borrowed money from them to start building again.

NP: In 1946, was the interior of the store damaged by water or anything else that might have come in, do you know?

LK: My mother-in-law said that the floor caved in so they had to put a new floor in. That I know, but outside of that, I don't know. I do know the girls—it was April Fool's day, and [they] lived upstairs. And one of the girls told me they went upstairs, told my father-in-law, "There's water in the stairway." They come early because they come out from the country to come to work. And my father-in-law said, "April fool, you're just kidding me." But he looked at them, and he said they were kind of green around the gills, so he went downstairs and found that it was true. So they didn't know about the tidal wave until after it happened.

NP: Wow. That's kind of amazing, isn't it?

LK: Wasn't it early in the morning or something?

NP: Yes, yes. It was about, I think [7:00] or so in the morning. You would think they would have heard the crashing and everything being thrown around. I guess he was a good sleeper.

(Laughter)

NP: All right, so you came in in '51. Did you live above the store at that time?

LK: That's the old Japanese style, too, to live above the store.

NP: What was it like, the living quarters?

LK: It was fine. It was just like a regular house because it was a house built on top of the concrete. Second floor there was a kitchen and a bath, and a bedroom on the third floor and three bedrooms on the top floor and a living room and a bathroom. The maid's quarters were downstairs.

NP: On the first floor of the house?

LK: Above the second floor, there was sort of a half floor there.

NP: Okay, okay, so did you have kind of your own area for the younger children and the older ones?

LK: Mm hmm [yes]. We had the whole upstairs, the fourth floor. Because my in-laws lived—their bedroom was on the same floor as the kitchen.

NP: And what kind of responsibilities did you have in the family?

LK: As a Japanese bride, you were the last to take a bath, you were the last (chuckles). . . .

NP: First up in the morning.

LK: No. We had a housekeeper and a maid, so it was all right. I didn't have any housekeeping duties; we had a laundress and a maid. So housework duties, no. I was very fortunate. I didn't even know how to cook. (Chuckles) That was good.

NP: You began to work in the store, then?

LK: Yes.

NP: What kind of work did you do, what kind of jobs did you have?

LK: Well, at first, I used to do the books, and then I went into the store and we—my mother-in-law and I sort of ran the store. When she retired at social security age, I took complete control. But I always deferred to her, Japanese style.

NP: Well, as long as I've known you, I knew you in that store. (LK laughs.) And I think when I first met you, I don't think she was in the store at that time, in the [19]70s.

LK: Maybe. I can't remember when it was.

NP: I always thought of it as your store.

(Laughter)

NP: So you brought up your children. And how many children did you have?

LK: I have three children—one son [Dennis] was born in Minneapolis, and two girls that were born here.

NP: That's Eileen and Pearl, who also ended up helping you in the store?

LK: Yes.

NP: All of them helped you, as I remember.

LK: That's right. They had to.

NP: So did they grow up downstairs, like in a playpen or a crib in the store?

LK: No. We had a maid, a baby-sitter who watched them upstairs.

NP: She made it probably a lot easier because you could focus on . . .

LK: Yes. As far as I was concerned, I was lucky.

NP: Before the '60 tidal wave, what was the store like?

- LK: Old-fashioned looking. We were able to renovate completely after the '60 tidal wave because there was nothing left in the store, not one thing except the pillars.
- NP: What do you mean by old-fashioned looking? How would you describe it?
- LK: The show windows were high, and the door was the double-door type, iron and wood kind, iron type of doors. The floor was hardwood, and the gondolas were on homemade type.
- NP: Gondolas?
- LK: Gondolas are the things that you put the bolts of material on.
- NP: Oh, okay.
- LK: And we had showcases, but they were all old-fashioned looking.
- NP: The glass kind?
- LK: Mm hmm [yes].
- NP: By then, were you predominantly a store for fabrics?
- LK: Yes.
- NP: You weren't hardware anymore?
- LK: No, that was after the war.
- NP: At that time, did most of the women sew their own clothes?
- LK: Yes they did. That was one thing the girls over here had to learn, how to sew, I think. Most of them went to sewing school.
- NP: So was it a very popular store?
- LK: I think it was.
- NP: Were there a lot of other dry-good stores?
- LK: Yes. There was one down the street, Hawaiian Importing, and KTA had a dry goods store; as long as the mother was living, they had one.
- NP: Did you also have Japanese goods?
- LK: Yes, we had the vases and gift items, I guess you would call them.
- NP: I remember that in your store. I always used to love to come and see those things; they were beautiful quality. Now did your mother-in-law go to Japan . . .

- LK: My father-in-law used to pick them.
- NP: Would he go to Japan to pick them out?
- LK: Mm hmm [yes].
- NP: And would he do it on an annual basis?
- LK: He did it partly pleasure and partly business, so he just went when he wanted to go. But always before Christmas, so it was about July when he would go.
- NP: Would people wait for him to return so that they could see what kind of selection he had?
- LK: No, I don't think they were that anxious.
- NP: All right, let's talk about what was your life like before the tidal wave when the kids were growing up. Did you have time for recreation and some social life or were you pretty busy with the family?
- LK: Well, six days a week, I worked in the store, so it was only Sundays. My husband went golfing on Sundays, but he got to the point where he could come home at noon, and then we would go out. But I used to drive, so we used to take my mother-in-law out; she wanted to go out in the country. She liked Sunday drives. So the kids always went with us.
- NP: Are those good memories that you have?
- LK: Mm hmm [yes].
- NP: Picnics and . . .
- LK: Yes.
- NP: Okay, let's talk about the tidal wave.
- LK: Nineteen sixty?
- NP: Nineteen sixty. Your memories of where you were.
- LK: That was Sunday; we had gone to the movies, came back about 8:30, and they'd said there was a tidal wave alert. Before that, we had had two or three false alarms. So we (chuckles) put up a few—took a few things off the floor and put them up higher. And that was the extent of our preparation for that tidal wave. And we went to bed. I was still reading the Sunday paper when I heard this big roaring sound. So I went running to my girls' room, looked out the window, and I saw this big, big wall of water. I swear it was higher than the lamppost. It came over and all the lights went out. And that was it. My mother-in-law called us from downstairs, she said, come down, because they had a concrete floor and we were on a wooden floor, so we took the kids

and went downstairs to the second floor. We looked out her window and Hilo Furniture was floating away. They were next door, they were a wooden building, and they were just floating away. So we stayed there at night, and in the morning, when we looked out the window, somebody from KTA said, "Stay there until it gets really lighted, until the sun comes up," so we didn't go out at all. And we stayed. We saw people. I saw Johnny Yuen's father carry his mother on his back; they were in the chicken house [i.e., Hawai'i Chicken Store, owned by Mun Hon Yuen and Fannie Y.T. Yuen. See interview with Laura Yuen Chock.] Right on the corner in Mamo Street. And he carried her to safety on his back. I was quite touched by that.

NP: That was at the time of the first wave pretty much?

LK: It was morning already.

NP: She had survived that. So when you looked out, you saw this huge wall of water coming in, and could you feel the impact when it hit the building?

LK: Yes. It shook the building.

NP: It shook the building. And there were subsequent waves that came through.

LK: We didn't notice those so much. Just that first one really got us. But it was just a black wall. I can still see it.

NP: How did you feel?

LK: I didn't know the devastation that it could do really. It didn't dawn on me that the store was completely wiped out until I went downstairs in the morning. And there was nothing, not even a stick, not even a button, nothing in the store.

NP: I guess the walls had been pushed in so the water could come through?

LK: It went straight through the glass windows and all the way down to the back KTA parking lot—because we found some materials back there among the dirt that was so high.

NP: Was the back of the building wiped out also so it was just open, basically, like an arcade or something?

LK: That's right.

NP: You must have been in shock.

LK: The floor had gone down, the next door [Yano Furniture] was an appliance center. And their refrigerators, and stoves, ranges and stuff were in the hole in our so-called basement. And that's when Mother decided to close up the basement, so we filled it in—we had tractors coming down with dirt inside the store, and they packed it down, closed off the basement.

- NP: You know when you go down to Cafe Pesto and some of those stores [today], they have high ceilings. Was that the actual ceiling?
- LK: Yes. [But] they lowered it. We lowered it after that, so there's a space in between [floors].
- NP: Oh, so it was almost two stories, I'd say, two stories high, the height of the cement, the concrete roof.
- LK: It is a two-story building.
- NP: So in other words . . .
- LK: But we had very high ceilings, different finishing style.
- NP: Where the water came through was extremely high, which might have helped save your life.
- LK: Could be because of that concrete above us.
- NP: Wow. So in the morning, you came downstairs. How did your in-laws feel?
- LK: My mother-in-law took it hard. Very, very hard. Because it had only been fourteen years in between the '46 and the '60 tidal waves. But we survived. People were very, very good. They came to help us; they brought us trucks to haul away whatever we could. We did find some material underneath all that mud and debris. The Y. Hata trucks came over and they put them on the back of the trucks, took 'em out to Kolekole—I don't know how we got there or why someone decided we should go there—and threw the material in at the top of the river and let it run down and let the water clean it. And then we laid it on the grass, the lawn over there, stretched out and dried it. And people came in to buy ten cents a yard, twenty-five cents a yard. And they bought it too. (Chuckles)
- NP: People have told me about—they remember the material that they bought from you and they remember the clothes that they made.
- LK: So (it) was prewashed. (Chuckles)
- NP: Yeah, prewashed and sort of preshrunk.
- LK: Yes.
- NP: You mentioned that after that, you were able to get a small business loan.
- LK: Yes. So we remodelled it, did it completely over. Why not?
- NP: Did you ever talk about being in a tidal wave zone and thought about moving as an alternative?

- LK: If we could have picked up our building, I think we would've moved. We would've, but no. It was there [on Kamehameha Avenue]. Grandfather built it, and so we had to stay there.
- NP: Lucky for Hilo that you didn't because now with the renovation and all, it's a beautiful, beautiful building.
- LK: It is a nice place.
- NP: And there's a memory, there's history there now as a result of that.
- LK: Mm hmm [yes].
- NP: What kind of changes did you decide to make given that you had the opportunity to remodel?
- LK: Oh, we had this—oh, what do you call, he's not an architect, these planners, Matthews and Matthews Associates, I think. They brought in a plan that was beautiful, so we fell in love with it, took it. And he did all the inside.
- NP: And about how long did it take to do all this?
- LK: We didn't open until September. And someone told us. "You not supposed to open in September." Japanese have a—*Sho Go Ku*. *Sho* is the first month, January. *Go* is May, and *Ku* is September. And well, in January I had my cancer surgery, and in May we had the tidal wave, so they said, "You're not supposed to open in September," but we just wanted to get back in business, so we did.
- NP: Did you have your surgery before the tidal wave?
- LK: Mm hmm, that year.
- NP: I didn't realize it was that long ago.
- LK: Thirty-eight years now. (Chuckles)
- NP: What a survivor.
- (Laughter)
- NP: So that was a terrible year for you.
- LK: Mm hmm [yes].
- NP: Or a year of—if you looked at it, as a year of surviving.
- LK: Yes. My mother died that year, too.
- NP: Were you able to go back to see your mother?

LK: I'd had surgery and the doctor said no. She died in April.

NP: Since 1951 were you able—since you moved . . .

LK: Yes, yes.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

NP: So, after that delicious pause for *anpan*, we'll continue talking about the impact of the tidal wave. You mentioned that you decided because of the building, for your family to stay there and continue on and you had a small business loan. Was it difficult financially to recover from the tidal wave?

LK: No. We had gotten to the point where we had this lot here. My mother-in-law had this lot from right after the war broke out. She had bought the two lots here.

NP: This is on Likeke Street right off of Haihai [Street].

LK: Yes. And they had paid off whatever they had borrowed; we were at the point where, "Let's start building a house." And then the tidal wave struck, so the [plans for the] house went down the drain. But people were very, very nice. They offered help, they offered housing, they used to bring food over for us, and of course, we couldn't stay there, because there was no water there or electricity.

NP: Where did you go?

LK: We went to someone's house. And they were very, very nice. People came out to help us out at Kolekole, too, when we were there. They helped pull out the material, they helped dry them, lay them out on the lawn. I think Hilo people are nice people. They are small-town people and they are very considerate of everyone else. I read in the paper the other day where it said that you can recognize a person from Hawai'i anywhere—in the [*Honolulu*] *Advertiser*. You can. Something about—you even see them on the Mainland, and you know they're from Hawai'i. They're warm and friendly. Minnesota was like that, too. But I think the community did pull together very much so. And Japanese style, they give you money; they help you out in any way they can. It was all right. People, I think, were afraid. I think fourteen years later, my mother-in-law says, "Are we gonna get a tidal wave this year?" (Chuckles) She was kind of worried about that, but that passed, too, although we had a big earthquake in '75.

NP: Mm hmm, on Thanksgiving.

LK: Yeah. That one knocked all our vases down. I can just see them—we could just see them coming down the shelves from the top to the bottom, breaking.

NP: Were you in the stairway at the time?

LK: Mm hmm [yes], it was daytime, we were under the doorway. One lady went under the table. But we could see the vases just coming down and breaking all the glasses and

going down and taking everything with it. But outside of that, it was fine.

NP: And the building stood.

LK: The building withstood. It's concrete, so I guess—It's no good against earthquakes, but it was all right against tidal waves.

NP: So you had to live with other families for. . . .

LK: Until we got electricity and water back in our building.

NP: Was that a matter of days or weeks or months?

LK: Couple of weeks, I think.

NP: Do you remember the name of the family when you stayed with?

LK: Mm hmm, Dot Kawahara gave us her home because she had another house. And then Paul Takei took my kids with him because the two younger girls were too young, yet. I think they were nine and seven or something. But my son stayed with us, and he helped run around.

NP: What do you think was the effect of the tidal wave on the children?

LK: They learned how to work. They learned what catastrophe was. I don't know whether they realized or they got the full impact, but they knew. They knew they had to work hard. It was good for them.

NP: Do they ever talk about it? Do they ever reminisce?

LK: Not about things like that. I haven't heard them anyway.

NP: Maybe if they read this oral history someday, they will.

LK: (Chuckles) Maybe.

NP: Have your grandchildren asked you about it?

LK: Yes. Don't they have some kind of "what my grandmother did" type of thing in school? Well, I think three of my grandchildren already asked me for some of those essays. They were surprised that we went through things like that: that I was in [internment] camp and that we survived the tidal wave.

NP: We assume that they'll remember these things, and . . .

LK: They cannot comprehend.

NP: . . . they don't know. And when you look at Hilo today, it looks so finished, the new town and all the changes. Now did your family lose friends or people who were close

to them in the tidal wave?

LK: Yes. Neighbors down the street, I think. The whole family was gone. They used to run a restaurant on Mamo Street. I can't remember their names now.

NP: They didn't make it through?

LK: No. He had gone back after the first wave, and they got swept out.

NP: But you came back and you renovated, rebuilt, and reopened Hata's.

LK: Yes. Some people did come back. We had tenants before that didn't want to come back because we were in the tidal wave zone. That was all right; we had other tenants.

NP: And how much longer did you continue to run the store?

LK: Until 1989. Downtown was getting no customers. We used to have the walk-in trade. Then we didn't get it anymore. Before, Mo'oheau Park was the bus station, so kids from high school, they didn't have, everybody didn't have a car in those days. And they all used to come down that way. People would come from the country, used to use the bus stop there. And we had a lot of walk-in trade. But we didn't get that in the last few years.

NP: So you could see it eroding away gradually?

LK: Mm hmm [yes]. Stores were always closing up and going away. I think the whole block there was almost all Japanese owned when I first came here. And when we ended, we were the only ones. Jewelry stores, dry goods, meat markets, they were all there . . .

NP: Restaurants.

LK: They were all Japanese [owned]. When we closed up, nobody. We were the last ones.

NP: During that time period, I remember you sold sewing machines; I got my first sewing machine from you.

LK: A Viking.

NP: (Chuckles) A Viking on the installment plan.

LK: That's right, good machine.

NP: I still have it and . . .

LK: Sewing classes. My daughter was old enough to teach.

NP: I remember that.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

NP: . . . resourceful in trying to find ways as long as you could to survive.

LK: But the kids didn't want it [i.e., the business] anymore.

NP: If they wanted to, do you think you would have considered moving to another part of town?

LK: I don't think we could move because we never ever paid rent, right?

NP: That's right.

LK: We didn't have to so it was easier.

NP: Would stores like Singer and JC Penney be competition also?

LK: No. I don't think so. We were a specialty shop and we had nice things.

NP: Beautiful, beautiful things, materials. Would people come from Honolulu sometimes to buy?

LK: No, but people used to come from Kona to buy.

NP: From Kona, yeah.

LK: We had a good business going.

NP: So what do you think was the reason for Hata's being able to survive for so long?

LK: I think because of the quality merchandise that we had. We tried to keep it up there because the discount houses always had the cheaper ones. Woolworth, Kress or whoever, they used to have the run-of-the-mill type of things. But we kept up to them. I think it was the quality. We had a variety of things, too. And we had good service. (Chuckles)

NP: I was just going to say, did you have any particular philosophy about customers?

LK: No, just to keep them happy. Because we could provide service whereas the other big stores did not, right?

NP: I always remember going into your store and you greeting—always greeting, and you were always there, and you were always dressed elegantly.

LK: No. (Chuckles)

NP: Yes. (Chuckles) What do you think---just a final question, what do you think the impact of the tidal wave—the one that you lived through—was on Hilo? What kind of changes did it bring about or not bring?

LK: It changed downtown completely because people moved away from there. It was in a tidal wave zone and they didn't want to take a chance, or risk [being in] another tidal wave over there. So it changed the face of downtown Hilo. And I think downtowns—all over the country, I think, are deteriorating, aren't they? They're all going to the suburban malls and so forth. So downtown went down.

NP: And it may have happened. . . .

LK: Because of the tidal wave. It may have happened for other reasons, too. The malls coming up. It wasn't the competition, that wasn't any question. Because they carry inexpensive goods mostly. They went for price at the stores.

NP: Well, thank you so much for sharing all of this knowledge and memories. I really appreciate that.

END OF INTERVIEW

**TSUNAMIS REMEMBERED:
Oral Histories of Survivors
and Observers in Hawai'i**

Volume I

**Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

April 2000