

Ruth Sasaki

*Ruth Sasaki: Writer and Storyteller*

Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Shanna Farrell  
in 2022

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Ruth Sasaki, 2019

## Abstract

Ruth Sasaki was born in San Francisco, California in 1952. She was raised in the Richmond District and was an avid reader and writer from an early age. She received a B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley and later earned a Master of Arts degree from San Francisco State University. She lived abroad in both England and Japan and had a long career in intercultural communication and e-learning development. She is the author of *The Loom and Other Stories* and the editor of "Topaz Stories." Her mother's family was incarcerated at Tanforan and Topaz. In this interview, Sasaki discusses her early life, memories of growing up in San Francisco, her father, who was Kibei, and her mother, who was Nisei, her mother's experience while incarcerated at Tanforan and Topaz during World War II, her siblings, her family's connection to San Francisco's Japantown, the role of language, food, and church in her early life, her interest in reading and writing, her experience in grade and high school, attending UC Berkeley as an undergraduate, experience studying abroad in England, moving to Japan to teach English, experience returning to the US, career in intercultural training and e-learning development, experience balancing work and her graduate studies, experience writing *The Loom and Other Stories*, creation of the Topaz Stories project, participation in Tsuru for Solidarity, the personal and professional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and her reflections on her writing career.

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## Project History

After the entrance of the United States into World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which mandated the forced removal of Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast into incarceration camps inland for the duration of the war. This unjust incarceration uprooted families, disrupted businesses, and dispersed communities—impacting generations of Japanese Americans.

The Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Oral History Project documents and disseminates the ways in which intergenerational trauma and healing occurred after the United States government's incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. These interviews examine and compare how private memory, creative expression, place, and public interpretation intersect at sites of incarceration.

Initial interviews in this project focus on the Manzanar and Topaz prison camps in California and Utah, respectively, and pose a comparison through the lens of place, popular culture, and collective memory. How does memory graft differently on different sites? What gets remembered about these sites, and by whom? How does memory differ across generations? Has interpretive work around these sites provided intergenerational catharsis for families of those incarcerated? Does geography and popular culture matter in the healing process?

Exploring narratives of healing as a through line, these interviews of descendants of World War II incarceration investigate the impact of different types of healing, how this informs collective memory, and how these narratives change across generations.

This oral history project began in 2021 with generous funding from the National Park Service's Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant. Most of the early interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.



## Interview 1: January 14, 2022

01-00:00:00

Farrell: Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with Ruth Sasaki on Friday, January 14, 2022. This is our first interview for the Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Project and we are speaking over Zoom. Ruth, can you start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:33

Sasaki: I was born in San Francisco in 1952. That's seven years after the camps closed and the war ended. I grew up in the Richmond district, which was a very integrated neighborhood. We moved there when I was like one-and-a-half years old. I was actually born in Japantown, so the only world I really knew was that Richmond district neighborhood. In many ways it was a very insular existence because there were neighbors of all different types. I went to school where I had Jewish and Chinese American friends and Russian friends. I think it gave me maybe a false sense of the real world, in a sense. It was almost like a paradise. I mean it wasn't perfect. I think we were still in the melting pot mentality, where everybody aspired to be not white but sort of the Anglo-yardstick. We were friends with people from all different backgrounds and yet we didn't know a lot about their backgrounds or their family lives; we were school friends. In one sense it was great because my family was very stable. We didn't move around a lot. We moved from Twenty-Third Avenue to Thirty-Eighth Avenue when I was eight years old and I had to change schools. That was a big change. I had a great degree of stability. I think the advantage of that is that you grow up with the same friends. You add friends but sort of the same stable base of people who know you. There's church, there's school. Your family. And so you have a sense of identity, which has nothing to do with your racial identity or any of that stuff. I'm Ruth and people know me as Ruth. I guess leaving that world was kind of a transition but maybe we can talk about that later.

01-00:02:52

Farrell: Yeah, and when you were growing up in the Richmond, are there any sites or sounds or smells that you remember from your neighborhood? Either Twenty-Third or Thirty-Eighth Avenues.

01-00:03:05

Sasaki: Fog.

Fo-00:03:06

Farrell: Fog.

01-00:03:08

Sasaki: The foghorn. Having to get all bundled up in the summer because it was so cold and then if we go downtown it's like you're sweating because it's so hot. Yeah. Really it was a foggy, foggy childhood. But that was what I was used to so I didn't mind it. I think partly because of that I spent a lot of time indoors reading, which turned out to be a great thing. My mother loved the fog. She

had memories of living in Topaz and she hated hot weather. She was in paradise out in the outer Richmond, so that was one sort of overriding memory. Actually, I'm skipping ahead again but when I went to Japan for the first time in 1975, it was, I remember taking off from San Francisco Airport. You know how you sort of break through the cloud cover and suddenly it's sunny and there's all these clouds below you? I thought, "I grew up under that. My whole existence happened under that fog blanket." It seemed very symbolic to me because going to Japan was like breaking out of that fog blanket. But, again, we can maybe talk about Japan later.

01-00:04:43

Farrell:

Yeah. I love the way you put that, as the fog as being symbolic. As a Richmond district resident myself, I certainly understand the fog and I think that the micro climates in this part of town is something that not a lot of people are aware of who don't live in the Bay Area. But the fog for sure. You mentioned that, so subsequently, you spent a lot of time inside reading. What were some of the books that you were reading or some of the stories that you were drawn to?

01-00:05:133

Sasaki:

Well, various ones through the years as I grew up. My sister Kathy was into Nancy Drew books so of course I read them all. [I envied her independence; she was (presumably) still a teenager, yet she had her own car; she could go shopping at a department store and buy whatever she wanted; she traveled all over and stayed at inns and hotels. That takes serious money!—probably not what most readers take away from Nancy Drew books!] I personally—none of my other sisters were into this—but I loved the Black Stallion books. I liked horses. I started writing when I was pretty little. In the fourth grade I would write these horse stories. Later I thought, "Now, why did I write horse stories?" I think it's because when you're choosing your protagonist it's somebody or something, some animal or something that you can identify with. At that time I didn't see hardly any Asian-American protagonists, so it was unthinkable to write about a Japanese American girl like myself. So a lot of my stories were horse stories.

01-00:06:16

Farrell:

Did you ever visit the horses in Golden Gate Park?

01-00:06:21

Sasaki:

I did. I went riding there a couple of times.

01-00:06:25

Farrell:

That's great. You didn't grow up riding horses, right? That was just something you were drawn to?

01-00:06:33

Sasaki:

No, no. It was a fantasy. [I bought my dad two packs of pipe tobacco once because the company was sponsoring a contest to name a colt. The winner

would win the horse! I thought we could keep it in the garage and graze it on the lawn in the backyard. Lucky for that horse that I didn't win!]

A lot of my stories were about horses, racehorses. My classmates all thought I spent all my weekends hanging out at a racetrack. I had never been to one. It was just kind of all in my head. Yeah, so I didn't grow up riding, horseback riding.

01-00:06:57

Farrell:

I'd love to hear a little bit more about your family. Could you tell me your father's name and some of your early memories of your dad?

01-00:07:07

Sasaki:

My father's name was Shigeru Sasaki. He was a Kibei. He was born in Berkeley and when he was eight his grandfather decided it was time to take the family back to Hiroshima. He went to school in Japan from eight to eighteen and then came back here to San Francisco. My memories with my dad, he was great. He loved the outdoors. He was very active. He had four daughters when I was growing up and we used to kid that we were like half of a softball team. He taught us how to throw a football. He took us fishing and all that stuff. It was great. He was very gentle and yet he could be very strict. He never hit us or spanked us but when we did something he didn't approve of he'd give us this very stern look. That was enough to like make us instantly get back in line because we were kind of scared of him in that way. But not really, you know what I mean? My sisters had a story that once he and I got into this argument and then I threw a little toy broom at him. [I was about three years old, I think.] They were like appalled because they would never think of throwing something at my dad. But we had a really good relationship so we were very close.

01-00:08:58

Farrell:

Did he have any siblings?

01-00:09:02

Sasaki:

He had an oldest brother. There's kind of an interesting story there because the eldest brother was born in Japan before my grandparents emigrated. According to my aunt Momoko, he was left in Japan when they emigrated and came to San Francisco because their parents—my great-grandparents—wanted to ensure that my grandparents would return, so they kept the son there. I don't know if that's true or not but that's what she said. All the rest of the siblings, he had four sisters and my dad was the second to youngest, so he has three older sisters, [who were all born in San Francisco,] and one younger sister, [who, like my dad, was born after the Sasaki family moved to] Berkeley.

01-00:09:52

Farrell:

You might have just explained the reason but do you have a sense of why his parents, they moved the family back to Japan?

01-00:10:03

Sasaki:

Yeah. I don't know. This is all speculation. But I have to say, another little tangent before I answer that question, is I was raised in a public school education and so I never questioned why my grandparents came to America. It was assumed everybody wants to come here, right? So when I was an adult, actually, my mother revealed to me that her parents, my grandmother, on her last trip to Japan before the war, had actually had a house built because they were planning to go back. That just shocked me because I had never imagined that they wanted to go back. It was against that whole kind of, not brainwashing but the way that you're conditioned to think everyone wants to come to America and they don't want to go back. In my father's parents case, the reason they came in the first place, I think, was financial. There was some kind of setback in the family and so he as the eldest son came to California to try to recover the family wealth. He did quite well. He had like a wholesale business for a while and then later, around when my dad was born and growing up, they had—I think it was like a grocery store in Berkeley. He decided in 1926—and this is two years after the Exclusion Act—that it was time to go back. I wonder if he was just feeling like, "Okay, conditions are getting worse here for us. People can't come over here as easily and so I don't know what our prospects are." This is all speculation. And then also, of course, their eldest son was still in Japan. Because he had done well enough, I think he decided it was time.

01-00:12:24

Of course the kids, it was terrible for the kids because they had been born here and they didn't want to leave. The eldest daughter had a boyfriend here. She was sixteen. All the kids, it was very hard for them and also hard after they went back because in Japan, if you're the slightest bit different you're ostracized and you're teased. So they had a hard adjustment.

01-00:12:50

Farrell:

Yeah. I was going to ask if your father ever talked about what it was like for him to move to Japan, what the assimilation process was like for him there.

01-00:13:00

Sasaki:

My dad didn't talk about his past very much at all. Only pretty much when he came to visit me in Japan in 1976 and then like towards the end of his life he started to reveal a few things. But it was like all the time I was growing up I was more familiar with my mother's side of the family because they were here. They spoke English, they were here. We were surrounded by them at every holiday. And my dad, we occasionally met one of his sisters when they visited. But they were like strangers. They didn't speak English that well. Except for one aunt who was in Hawaii.

01-00:14:10

Farrell:

Your father came back to the US when he was eighteen. Did he go on to college here? I know that he was an entrepreneur and imported goods from

Japan and sold them wholesale. Did he start doing that right away? Do you have a sense of what his trajectory was?

01-00:14:30

Sasaki:

Yeah. Because his older brother had actually come to the US on business. He had a business here and he was living next to my mom's family. That's how they met. Well, actually, they met in Japan once when my mom was visiting with her mother on a buying trip. They had gone to the Sasaki family house. I guess they were in Hiroshima at that time. Because their neighbor, that was their neighbor's mother, right, so they stopped in to say hi to her. My dad and his sister came home from school on their bicycles and hid in the kitchen and were like peeking out at the American visitors. He was too shy to come out. So I guess they didn't really meet. But the next year he went to America. I'm wondering, hmm. Anyway, he was living next door so it was like perfect. He was living with his brother and going to like night school. All I know about his pre-war occupation was at one point he was like driving around collecting subscriptions for the *New World Sun*. I'm not sure what else he was doing. And then he was drafted I think in December of '41 before Pearl Harbor.

01-00:16:05

Farrell:

What branch of the service was he in?

01-00:16:09

Sasaki:

He was just in the army infantry.

01-00:16:11

Farrell:

In the army, okay. Did he ever talk about his experience in the service?

01-00:16:18

Sasaki:

Very seldom. I just got a few things in the years much later about how they were treated. Because he was not in the 442. He was in the 1800, so he spent the war in various forts around the south and things like that. He was basically a driver. That's what he usually ended up doing. He remembers having to transport German prisoners of war from one place to another. He remembered some of the Kibei soldiers having to pick up trash along the highway under armed guard. This is the guard of their fellow soldiers. He also remembered when Roosevelt came to visit one of the forts where he was stationed. They took all the Kibei and locked them up in the guardhouse. He had that kind of memory and he didn't talk about it very much.

01-00:17:28

Farrell:

Did he and your mother marry before he was drafted?

01-00:17:29

Sasaki:

No, they got married during the war.

01-00:17:32

Farrell:

Oh, that's right. That's right. Sorry. I knew that. I spaced for a second.

01-00:17:36

Sasaki: They had their first date, I think, was it the day before Pearl Harbor?

01-00:17:45

Farrell: Oh, okay. That's a fateful day. And before we get further into your parent's marriage story, I'd love to hear a little bit more about your mom—her name and some of your early memories of her.

01-00:17:58

Sasaki: Okay. My mom's name was Tomiko Takahashi. She was born in San Francisco and she had an older sister, Kiyo, and two younger brothers, Shigeharu and Edwin. By the time they got to the last, he had an Anglicized name [with a Japanese middle name]. She was, for most of the time, a housewife after I was born. She would occasionally help my dad with his business by doing secretarial work and things. She was very hard of hearing and it grew progressively worse through the years. She didn't talk that much about the war or those experiences. I found out later about the work that she did in the camps. I don't know when I should talk about that. She had graduated from UC Berkeley. She graduated from Commerce High School and went to UC Berkeley and majored in education. Graduated in 1939. But she couldn't get a teaching job because California was not hiring Asians at that time, so she and my aunt both helped at my grandfather's store on Grant Avenue.

01-00:19:29

Farrell: And she was helping with the store after graduation and before she was sent to the camps?

01-00:19:35

Sasaki: Right.

01-00:19:38

Farrell: Okay. We can talk about her camp experience anytime you want. If now feels like a good time, or we can [talk about it later].

01-00:19:48

Sasaki: Okay. Maybe I'll just say a little bit now.

01-00:19:52

Farrell: Sure. Absolutely.

01-00:19:53

Sasaki: When she was in Tanforan a couple of Nisei women who had graduated from Mills College, it was Kay Uchida, Yoshiko Uchida's sister, and Grace Fujii, decided that something needed to be done for the preschool kids. They called a meeting of all the college graduates among the internees and organized preschools for the kids. My mom was teaching preschool in Tanforan. When they were transferred to Topaz, they did the same thing. They organized a preschool system. I think it was in 1943 when Kay and Grace resettled and

left camp. They picked my mom to take over. From '43 to '45 she was the supervisor of Topaz preschools.

01-00:20:58

Farrell: Yeah, okay. And your mom was Nisei, is that correct?

01-00:21:06

Sasaki: Nisei, right.

01-00:21:06

Farrell: Okay. Did she have any siblings? Oh, you mentioned that, I'm sorry. Yes, okay. In San Francisco, do you know what neighborhood she grew up in?

01-00:21:22

Sasaki: She grew up in Japantown.

01-00:21:25

Farrell: In Japantown, okay. How old was she when Pearl Harbor happened, the day after she had her first date with your father?

01-00:21:40

Sasaki: Let's see, 1943. She was born in 1918 so—

01-00:21:47

Farrell: Okay, so she was in her early twenties.

01-00:21:50

Sasaki: Twenty-three or something.

01-00:21:51

Farrell: Yeah, okay. Can you tell me a little bit about what you've heard about when she went to Tanforan and then Topaz? Wherever you want to start with that and what you have heard or had learned about her experience.

01-00:22:13

Sasaki: Well, she didn't talk about Tanforan hardly at all. The only story from Tanforan that kind of stands out in my memory was that she had a Caucasian friend, Margaret, who came down to visit her in Tanforan and she just remembers in those days young women dressed much—I won't say better, that's a value judgment—dressed up a lot more than my generation. And so there was Margaret in her—I think she was wearing gloves and she had heels and her skirt and sweater and everything—walking over the train tracks to talk to my mom through the fence. She remembered that she really appreciated that Margaret came to visit, to see her. I don't remember her saying anything else about Tanforan. Topaz, of course, she talked about the dust and she talked about being worried about her parents because my grandmother had diabetes and she had to have a special diet. They would have to go and wait in line and get her food and bring it back to the barrack, that kind of thing. She remembers this friend of the family who would always sing *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree* when they were standing in line waiting for meals. They're just

very sort of random little memories. Most of them were about people they knew or funny things. Like she and Kiyō both came down with—I can't remember what it was—strep throat or something. Or maybe they had laryngitis—I can't remember what it was. Tonsillitis. I forgot what it was but they were both in the hospital. They had so many visitors that they both lost their voices, that kind of thing. That's about the kind of story that she would tell us.

01-00:24:35

Farrell:

Did she ever mention if it's the hospital or the medical staff at Topaz was accommodating of your grandmother's diabetes and her needing a special diet? I've heard so much about the food at Topaz and how it was not great and so I just wondered if they made accommodations for her.

01-00:24:58

Sasaki:

I don't know.

01-00:25:00

Farrell:

Okay. That's a very specific question—just thought I'd ask. Did your mom ever talk about her work in the preschool and kind of what her experience was?

01-00:25:13

Sasaki:

Well, she actually wrote it up and gave a little presentation to her church group. I can't remember when it was, the 1990s maybe. That's when I really sort of found out information. When she became the supervisor of preschools, then she was pretty much in charge of everything from teacher training, hiring, communication with parents, setting the schedule, all that kind of stuff. She would have to walk and visit, there were like four preschools sprinkled throughout the camp. She would have to walk to them even in the dust storms and in the winter ice to visit, to make sure everything was going okay. Yeah, so I think she found it rewarding because she was able to use her educational background, which she wasn't able to do before the war.

01-00:26:26

Farrell:

Your parents got married in 1943 while your dad was in the service and while your mom was at Topaz. Can you tell me a little bit about their courtship? If you know anything about their courtship in this circumstance and then their marriage. I know that you've written about that for Topaz stories but I'd love to hear it from you.

01-00:26:55

Sasaki:

Well, as I mentioned, they kind of met in Hiroshima. That must have been like in 1935 or something. I don't remember exactly, '34 or '35. It was in '35 because my dad went to San Francisco in '36. I think my mom, when he was living next door, my mom thought he was cute. But he was kind of shy and he didn't like make his move. But then maybe getting drafted was motivation and he asked her out. They went to a football movie, which was not really my mom's thing, but what we do for love. I think they went to another movie and



then he had to report. And then they continued to write to each other. He visited Topaz, I think, when he got leave. I don't know any details but I do know that when they decided to get married he got leave and he came to Topaz. They went to the Millard County Courthouse in Fillmore and got married there and then they honeymooned in Salt Lake City and spent almost the entire time visiting friends who had resettled there.

01-00:29:34

Farrell:

Do you know how long a period of time they had before your mom had to return to Topaz?

01-00:28:43

Sasaki:

I don't know how long the leave was, no.

01-00:28:45

Farrell:

Okay. Did they continue writing letters to each other after?

01-00:28:53

Sasaki:

Yeah. They continued writing. I think he may have visited again sometime. I don't know how often people got leave from the military but at any chance he would visit to see her.

01-00:29:06

Farrell:

Was your mom and her family at Topaz until it closed?

01-00:29:13

Sasaki:

My Aunt Kiyō resettled in 1944 and went to Chicago, which is where my Uncle Shig was — he was never in camp. He was a university student at UC and was kicked out with all the other Nisei. So he managed at that time to transfer to Ohio. I think it was Ohio State. And then he got his degree and then he went into a graduate program at—my mind blanked. What's the big university in Chicago?

01-00:29:52

Farrell:

The University of Chicago or Northwestern?

01-00:29:55

Sasaki:

Yeah. It was probably the University of Chicago.

01-00:29:56

Farrell:

There's a couple.

01-00:29:59

Sasaki:

Because the University of Chicago, he was doing his graduate work there, so she resettled in Chicago and they shared an apartment until he got drafted. When he got drafted—I guess in those days young women didn't live by themselves and so Edwin, who was about thirteen or something at the time—no, maybe he was sixteen by that time—went out to spend the summer with her. He had a part-time job at the International House at the University of Chicago, helping with the morning shift, breakfast shift. He remembered that

the ladies there, there were several Black ladies and a Japanese American lady, just kind of adopted him because he was there without his parents and he was this tall, skinny cute kid. They would like save food for him and things. He stayed for the summer and then he went back to Topaz. Aside from Kiyo and my Uncle Edwin briefly, the rest of them were all in Topaz until it closed or until they left. I can't remember if it was September or October. I think it was September of 1945.

01-00:31:18

Farrell: How long was your father in the service for?

01-00:31:24

Sasaki: Well, as I said, he was drafted—

01-00:31:29

Farrell: In '41?

01-00:41:30

Sasaki: Reported in January, I think, 1942 and then he didn't get out until 1946.

01-00:31:38

Farrell: Go ahead, please.

01-00:31:40

Sasaki: But he never got his GI Bill of Rights because a group of Kibei from the 1800 were given blue discharges because they complained about their treatment. They were court martialed and given blue discharges. That's something I didn't find out until the year he died. [One of the 1800 members, Kiyoshi Kawashima, organized an appeal starting in 1982 and with the help of Hyman Bravin, the lawyer who had represented them at their original court-martial, managed to get most of the blue discharges overturned. My dad got notice of his honorable discharge shortly before he died, in 1984.]

01-00:32:01

Farrell: Oh. He didn't talk about that? No. Yeah. It's, I feel like, a pretty glaring example of the structural racism. Yeah. Yeah. I know that your parents eventually come back to San Francisco, but did your mom end up anywhere else before she came back to the Bay Area or her parents?

01-00:32:31

Sasaki: No. She came with her parents back to San Francisco and worked for maybe nine months or something as a preschool teacher in San Francisco.

01-00:32:41

Farrell: Oh, interesting. So she was able to get a job after she came back?

01-00:32:44

Sasaki: She had recommendations from some of the Topaz school administrators.

01-00:32:51

Farrell:

Okay. Did you ever hear about what their experiences were like when they came back? Were they able to find housing? You mentioned your mom was able to find a job but—

01-00:33:03

Sasaki:

They were quite lucky because the Victorian on Pine Street that they rented before the war, they had a very good relationship with their landlord, who was Greek. His name was Tom Spilios. Tom let them store things in the basement and when they came back he was happy to see them and he rented the place back to them. Unfortunately, in the interim it had been rented by itinerant workers who left the place just absolutely filthy. It was a mess. My mom told me she remembered just going through and cloroxing the whole place to make it livable. But they were fortunate because so many Japanese Americans had nowhere to live and, in fact, friends who had got out of camp, were leaving camp would come back to San Francisco and many of them would stay at my grandparents' house until they could find lodging. My mother remembers going to work as a preschool teacher, coming back in the evening and helping my grandmother serve dinner in three shifts because there were so many people.

01-00:34:17

Farrell:

That's an incredible service to the community, though, to help out with that. Do you have a sense of how long they lived in that house on Pine Street before moving out to the Avenues?

01-00:34:28

Sasaki:

Well, so they came back in '45 and my family moved to the Avenues in 1954, so that period. After they moved out my grandparents and my Aunt Kiyo continued to live on Pine Street until my grandparents passed away. My grandfather died in '54. Was it '55? Maybe '55. My grandmother died in '57. At that point my Aunt Kiyo moved out to California Street. The Victorian was torn down and something else got built there.

01-00:35:23

Farrell:

Was that because of urban renewal that it was torn down?

01-00:35:26

Sasaki:

It wasn't part of the Japantown makeover but they built like a senior living center or something, rest home there.

01-00:35:37

Farrell:

Okay. Having read your book, *The Loom and Other Stories*, in I think the story First Love, there's a house on Pine Street that shows up and I think there's a mention of it being torn down because of urban renewal so I didn't know if that was something your family had experienced, that house was a product of that.

01-00:35:59

Sasaki: That happened after my family had moved out so I don't really know what the circumstances were.

01-00:36:04

Farrell: Okay. I didn't know if that was maybe something from your real life that made it into the book. So yeah, your parents started a family then, it sounds like, on Pine Street. Is that correct?

01-00:36:24

Sasaki: Yes.

01-00:36:27

Farrell: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your siblings? I know you're one of five and one of four sisters.

01-00:36:35

Sasaki: Yeah. The eldest is my sister Joan. She was born in 1946. The second child was a boy, the only boy of the family, but he only lived a week. That must have been just devastating for them. And then I had a sister Kathy, then a sister Susan and then me. I kind of feel that because we moved out of Japantown to the Richmond district when I was so little—the others remember Japantown and they remember living in a situation where they were surrounded by the Japanese community. They even spoke a little Japanese when they were little, that they learned from the grandparents and the parents. I had none of that. By the time I was speaking and doing that, we were in a very isolated, integrated Richmond district. I've always felt sort of—not excluded—but like I missed out on something, you know. In part, I think that's what drives me to find out so much about the past.

01-00:37:54

Farrell: So you didn't grow up speaking Japanese?

01-00:37:58

Sasaki: Just words, isolated words. Actually, a lot of them I discovered later, much to my chagrin, were like baby words that parents use with their kids.

01-00:38:13

Farrell: Do you have memories of your parents speaking Japanese to each other?

01-00:38:16

Sasaki: Yes. They usually did it when they didn't want us to understand what they were talking about. I think subconsciously that was a signal, like, "Okay, you're not supposed to be listening." That was a real barrier when I started studying Japanese because as soon as people start speaking Japanese I sort of tune out.

01-00:38:36

Farrell: That's really interesting. You were conditioned.

01-00:38:40

Sasaki: I had to really fight to overcome that.

01-00:38:46

Farrell: I'm curious if you could just tell me a little bit about your sisters and some of your early memories of them?

01-00:38:54

Sasaki: Well, let's see. Joan, because she's the eldest and she had the parents' generation to herself for a couple of years, she was always very responsible and always very much the big sister. After we grew up and the age differences weren't as important, I would tease her that she was like the little *otona*, meaning adult. Kathy, I think everyone was close to Kathy. She was very outgoing and athletic. It was really devastating for my family when she died in a rock climbing accident when she was twenty. That was probably the biggest loss that we've experienced. Susan and I were two years apart and so we played with each other a lot and we were very close.

01-00:40:00

Farrell: Let's see. With Joan, was she out of the house, because she was older than you? I have an older sister and she went away to college when I was in fifth grade, so I'm wondering if that was sort of a similar experience, where she left home when you were growing up.

01-00:40:24

Sasaki: Yeah. She left home in '64 and I got her room. Yes. She only lived in that house for three or something years. All the time that I was going to high school and junior high school she was in college already. She would come back for the summers.

01-00:40:48

Farrell: I relate to that, as well. I got my sister's room when she went to college, too. And after your parents moved to the Avenues, did they maintain a connection to Japantown?

01-00:41:04

Sasaki: Yeah. They would go shopping there. They didn't go to church back then. I'm actually the one that kind of got people going to church because my best friend, who I met in kindergarten, went to Sunday school every Sunday. I used to go to her house to play and I was kind of mischievous. It was really a change to be in someone else's house. I would do all these things that I wouldn't dare do at home. I think her parents probably decided, I think, this kid needs church so they invited me to join Joanne and it was the S.F. Independent Church, which was in Japantown on the south side of Geary. I think later I learned that it was sort of an incarnation of what before the war had been called the Reformed Church. So anyway, yeah, it was a mixture of like Japanese. The sermons were all in Japanese so we would sort of snooze during them. But the Sunday school was in English. I forgot why I'm talking about church. What was your question?

01-00:42:31

Farrell: If they maintained a connection to Japantown.

01-00:42:32

Sasaki: Yeah, so we would go to church every Sunday. I think my mom was very happy to get us all out of the house because my sisters started going, too. We would shop in Japantown and go to eat there. That was pretty much it. [I forgot to mention the funerals. As the Issei generation passed, we would go to funerals in the Buddhist Church. It was only at funerals, New Year's, and other death anniversaries that we would get a glimpse of the vestiges of a community that was no longer part of our everyday Richmond district existence.]

01-00:42:54

Farrell: So you did not grow up Buddhist and the church that you were going to, what denomination was that?

01-00:43:05

Sasaki: I have no idea. It was small and for me it was just a chance to see Joanne on Sunday. By the time I was in junior high my sisters had started and then they sort of transferred to Pine Methodist Church, which had moved out to 33rd Avenue. I think it's on 33rd Avenue, so we all started going there.

01-00:43:34

Farrell: And you didn't attend Japanese school?

01-00:43:39

Sasaki: I didn't. None of my sisters did. I know during the summer my mom would make an effort to teach us hiragana, the simple Japanese character, by taping the chart on the inside of the bathroom door. I kind of learned a few, I guess. But we didn't go. I think some of my friends did go. I kind of regretted it later.

01-00:44:09

Farrell: I think when we had talked during our pre-interview you mentioned that your mother grew up with the YMCA. Are you aware of her connection with the Y, how that started?

01-00:44:21

Sasaki: Well, all I know is that my grandparents were Buddhist and a lot of the young Nisei in Japantown kind of gravitated to the Y because it was more of an English speaking social thing. The Y would have dances and trips and things and so they all started participating in those. I think initially my grandparents were not happy about it. But I think they got over it.

01-00:44:59

Farrell: Do you remember if there were any family holidays that were really special or rituals or different celebrations? This is a broad question, too. It can be specifically Japanese but not necessarily. Just in general.

01-00:45:22

Sasaki: Well, the biggest holiday—[break in audio]

01-00:45:32

Farrell: Okay, we're back.

01-00:45:35

Sasaki: For us, the biggest holiday was always New Year's, Oshogatsu. My grandmother used to do it every year in Japantown before the war and it was like an open house. Friends of my aunt's always remembered that. This one friend of hers came up to me maybe ten, fifteen years ago at the New Year's and she would always say it was literally an open house. Everybody could go. Can you hear me?

01-00:46:11

Farrell: Yes, I can hear you. The audio was good the whole time.

01-00:46:15

Sasaki: Okay. Yeah, the video was freezing. She would, like all the single young Japanese guys like my dad before the war, would be invited to come over and eat. It was like a big deal. After my grandmother was no longer able to do it, my mother started to host it, first on 23rd Avenue. Of course, it shrank a bit. A lot of the people were dying and some people were having their own Oshogatsu celebrations. We continued it when we moved to 38th Avenue. When my mom died, my sister Joan started doing it, kind of a version of it. And, of course, during lockdown it stopped.

01-00:47:09

Farrell: What were some of the foods or the decorations or the music that you had during those celebrations?

01-00:47:20

Sasaki: The new year's celebrations?

01-00:47:21

Farrell: Yeah, sorry. During the open houses.

01-00:47:24

Sasaki: Music was never a part of it. It was all about food. I think in the old days there were more traditional Japanese dishes, things like the black beans. My mom would make garbanzo beans the way my grandmother made them. There were these little fishes that were like kind of fried and crispy and lotus root and all these things. And sushi. A lot of different kinds of sushi. Over the years it became more and more eclectic and some of the things that are more Japanese that people were not eating as much would fall off the menu. Over the years we would incorporate things like Chinese chicken salad and tabbouli and lemon chiffon pie. Lemon meringue pie rather. Chicken nuggets, whatever. There was really no ritual about it. It was just basically an open house where we would invite friends and relatives would come over. It was always fun because you never knew who was going to be there at any given time, so

people would meet, people who didn't know each other. We would drink *ozoni*, the New Year's soup, with mochi.

01-00:48:58

Farrell: Those sound like pretty great memories.

01-00:49:02

Sasaki: Yeah. We would spend the whole day before cooking.

01-00:49:07

Farrell: Yeah. I was going to ask if it was potluck style or your family did all the food preparation.

01-00:49:12

Sasaki: People would bring things like dessert or candy or something. We provided most of the food [with some exceptions. My friend Sue always brought char siu bao, and her husband, Mike, made his famous crunchy cabbage salad. It's not like we wouldn't eat those things at other times during the year, but we would look forward to Sue's char siu bao and Mike's cabbage salad on New Year's Day because they had become part of the tradition.]

01-00:49:23

Farrell: Any other important family holidays or celebrations?

01-00:49:30

Sasaki: Just the usual birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving. I can't think of anything unusual.

01-00:49:39

Farrell: Yeah, yeah. So kind of continuing with the food theme, did you [grow up with your] parents cooking Japanese food or did you eat other things? What was the role of food in your early life?

01-00:49:59

Sasaki: Well, my grandmother was a great cook. She would like always cook a lot of food and feed everybody. As a result my mother never learned to cook. When she got married she bought a Betty Crocker's cookbook and learned a few things, like how to make biscuits and things like that. She had some dishes that she learned from her mother. But we had a combination. Sometimes Japanese food. But the most Japanese that my mother cooked was like an occasional tempura, which is a lot of work. But she would make other things, too, like spaghetti and things like that.

01-00:50:55

Farrell: Did you grow up enjoying cooking? No. Okay.

01-00:51:02

Sasaki: I did learn to bake and I liked baking.



01-00:51:07

Farrell:

I also relate to those two things, as well. We talked a little bit about your early interest in reading and writing. Were there any other hobbies or pastimes that you enjoyed when you were growing up?

01-00:51:23

Sasaki:

When I was growing up. That's a hard one. Yeah. I liked to read. Hmm. Well, I always liked being outdoors. I liked sports, too. I wasn't great but I always enjoyed volleyball and softball, kickball, all that kind of stuff. I liked going fishing with my dad. I always wanted to learn how to ride a horse but didn't have enough opportunities. Yeah. I can't think of anything in particular.

01-00:52:09

Farrell:

Where would you go fishing with your father?

01-00:52:12

Sasaki:

He used to go just anywhere. I wouldn't go fishing with him when he did surf fishing at Ocean Beach and all along the coast. He was fishing for striped bass. But we would sometimes follow along after him just for the walk. And then he would go trout fishing. Rivers, like the American River. He would also go to places like Lake Davis or Lake Berryessa. We actually went in Marin County once. It's right around Belvedere. I remember we were like casting from the shore and my sister Joan got this huge bite and her pole's like bending and it had hooked to a passing rowboat. It was not a fish. We would just go wherever. Oh, and then when we went to Yosemite, most summers he would fish in the Merced. I don't think he ever caught anything there though.

01-00:53:20

Farrell:

Aside from Yosemite, did your family go on many vacations or out of town?

01-00:53:29

Sasaki:

Well, Yosemite was the big one because everybody loved going there and my dad would take five days off from his work. Sometimes we would go to Lake Tahoe around the Fourth of July weekend. We didn't take a whole lot of trips but in 1959 he took us all to Oregon for the centennial there and that was a very memorable trip. We stopped at Crater Lake, which was gorgeous and went to Portland, Oregon and came back. Most of our vacations were car trips, family car trips. We did go to the Grand Canyon much later, like in the 1970s. Not all of us. Joan was off at college. No, wait, was she still in college? No. She must have been working. But yeah, it was mostly car trips.

01-00:54:41

Farrell:

Okay. I do want to talk a little bit about your education in both grade school and high school. It seems like you attended for elementary school, Cabrillo and Lafayette starting in 1957. Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember? I mean it's so long ago. Your grade school, your elementary school, middle school, that time period.

01-00:55:18

Sasaki:

Okay. Cabrillo. I pronounce it like, I guess, a San Francisco native.

## Interview 2: January 20, 2022

02-00:00:10

Farrell: This is Shanna Farrell back with Ruth Sasaki on Thursday, January 20, 2022. This is our second interview for the Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Project and we are back talking over Zoom. When we left off last time, Ruth, we were starting to talk about your education. When you were in grade school you started off at Cabrillo Elementary. You were there from 1957 to 1960. Roughly what grades were those?

02-00:00:49

Sasaki: I went to Cabrillo from kindergarten through third grade and that's when my family moved and I had to change schools.

02-00:00:58

Farrell: Okay, so that's when you went from 23<sup>rd</sup> Ave to 38<sup>th</sup> Ave?

02-00:01:02

Sasaki: Right.

02-00:01:03

Farrell: Okay, and then after that you were at Lafayette from 1961 to 1964?

02-00:01:10

Sasaki: Yes.

02-00:01:11

Farrell: Okay. Between those two elementary schools, do you have any memories that stand out for you of your time in elementary school or maybe any hobbies or things, interests that you were developing?

02-00:01:30

Sasaki: Well, Cabrillo, that was so long ago. It was right up the hill from where we lived and I had a best friend who was a Japanese American girl. I guess the main thing I remember is that when I was in second grade, the teacher, I don't know, she must have thought I was advanced or something because she called my mother in for a conference and said that she thought I should be accelerated to—we were on sort of staggered school years and so we had the low second and the high second. I was in the low second and she wanted to move me to the high second grade, so I changed classes there. Let's see. So then I had a new set of friends there. At the end of the third grade we moved. I kind of met up again with those friends in junior high because they streamed the elementary schools together. I have much clearer memories of Lafayette, maybe because I was older. I made friends there who I'm still friends with. I had a teacher there who was really exceptional. Whenever people ask about influential teachers, his name always comes to mind. It's Mr. Adam. There was just something different about him. First of all, we didn't have a whole lot of male teachers at that time. Even among male teachers he was kind of different. He was more formal. He wore a suit or like a blazer, so he dressed more formally. He had a neat little mustache. He was very strict in a

way and kind of demanding in terms of academic standards. But I remember things like he taught us Russian, which was very unusual at that time. We were in the Cold War and there were just some lessons that I still remember. Like he taught us about all the different systems in the body, like the circulatory, the respiratory. I still remember drawing them out and learning all these words like "ventricle" and "alveoli." It was just really interesting. We also did art things, like ceramics. He would hold talent shows so that we could display our talent or lack thereof.

02-00:04:31

But it's interesting because I hooked up again with a fellow who I knew in Lafayette just a couple of years ago. We both flew to Oklahoma to protest [the impending transfer of migrant children from the border to the military prison at Ft. Sill]. It was like, "Clinton?" It was so weird because I hadn't seen him since the sixth grade. He has vivid memories of Mr. Adam and sixth grade, so it wasn't just me. He really was kind of an unusual teacher. Clinton remembered doing science experiments, which I don't remember at all. Anyway, so Mr. Adam was really kind of an influential teacher and a bunch of us stayed in touch with him for many years after we graduated from elementary school.

02-00:05:22

Farrell:

What did you like about him or his teaching style?

02-00:05:28

Sasaki:

I guess he had high standards. Because I had had teachers throughout school at Cabrillo, Lafayette who I just felt didn't get me at all. I have this memory of writing something that was a satire. I don't know why satire has always appealed to me. I can't remember, it was either in the third or the fourth grade maybe. It was a short thing but it was a satire. There was a character who was a very pompous, overblown guy who thought he was like God's gift. He made these pronouncements and he said something that was obviously wrong. That's my way of sort of poking the hot air. The teacher corrected it because she didn't understand that I was being ironic. And I thought, "Wow." That kind of a thing. There was none of that with Mr. Adam. He seemed to recognize what kids—who they were. I appreciated that.

02-00:06:44

Farrell:

Yeah, and sort of meeting you where you are but it also, it sounds like, seeing you as a person and not as a kid.

02-00:06:54

Sasaki:

It's also—

02-00:06:55

Farrell:

Oh, sorry. Go ahead, please.

02-00:06:55

Sasaki:

I was going to say the interesting thing is many years later I found out more about him. It was so weird because I just thought he was American. He was ethnically Polish and he had been born in a Russian community in China when it was occupied by Japan. He spoke all of those languages. Didn't come to the US until he was a young man and he didn't speak any English at that time. That's just a really interesting background.

02-00:07:29

Farrell:

Yeah, it's pretty remarkable. It's also interesting, too, thinking about the Richmond neighborhood. I think there's Little Russia in the neighborhood too, so I wonder if speaking Russian, teaching you Russian, that was also part of the neighborhood, too. It's also interesting to hear that there was a lot of creativity that he involved in his classroom. I feel like now we just hear about math and science, are really pushed, but if you're drawing the circulatory system or you're doing hands-on science experiments, I think that that also is a good way for a kid to learn and explore. Yeah. That's great.

02-00:08:16

Sasaki:

It was the variety, I think, and the fact that he didn't just stick to the textbook. I still remember a field trip where we went around to different places in San Francisco to look at the architecture. That's where we learned the terms Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. Stuff like that is still in my brain.

02-00:08:37

Farrell:

That's great, yeah. From there you went to George Washington High School and then you had graduated in 1970. Can you tell me a little bit about your time in high school? What was that experience like for you?

02-00:09:53

Sasaki:

Sure. Well, in between there I went to Presidio Junior High, from seventh, eighth and ninth grade. Washington, I really enjoyed my high school years. I was not one of the popular kids. But there was a bunch of us who were kind of similar and we became really good friends. I had a good English teacher that I really liked. We read *The Grapes of Wrath* in his class. I was sort of active in things like—there was a tradition where we did a junior day and a senior day performance for the whole school when we were juniors and seniors. My friends and I got together and wrote the script for both. We got involved in staging that and acting in it. Very much enjoyed that. What else? I can't think of anything else at the minute. Of course, by the time we were in high school the Vietnam War was becoming a really hot topic. I just remember in like the eleventh and twelfth grade thinking about my friends possibly getting drafted in the future. They were about to implement the lottery system, the number system. Yeah. And then, of course, we were at Washington during the summer of love. As far as we were concerned—we grew up in these kind of strict, sheltered Asian families—that could have happened in Tahiti for all we knew.

- 02-00:10:47  
Farrell: Yeah. Haight-Ashbury is across Golden Gate Park so it's a different part of the city.
- 02-00:10:54  
Sasaki: It is, yeah.
- 02-00:10:55  
Farrell: Yeah, yeah. Thinking about 1968, 1969, the Vietnam War, were these historical moments, these things that were going on very locally, were they something you discussed at home with your family or at school with friends or teachers?
- 02-00:11:16  
Sasaki: We didn't really talk about it much at home. My family was never the type that has political conversation. I didn't grow up very political at all. Let's see. I know there was a group of kids at school who were anti-war. There are all these little cliques in high school. But I wasn't involved with that that much. Although by 1969 I do remember my sisters Kathy and Susan and I participating in an anti-war march, one that kind of ended up in Golden Gate Park. By that time I was more into it.
- 02-00:12:01  
Farrell: What compelled you to participate in that march?
- 02-00:12:05  
Sasaki: Nixon. It was just kind of similar to the Trump years, where it's just that—what year was it that Cambodia was bombed? Was that 1970?
- 02-00:12:26  
Farrell: I'm actually not sure. I can check.
- 02-00:12:29  
Sasaki: Because I'm getting ahead of a story here but I remember my first quarter at UC, everybody was responding to that and there was a reconstitution and a strike and tear gas on campus and stuff, so it ramped up really quickly.
- 02-00:12:52  
Farrell: In high school were you starting to think about politics?
- 02-00:12:57  
Sasaki: Not really. [I did have one teacher, Richard Castile, who probably awakened my social conscience by getting us involved in collecting toys and canned food for the Delano grape strike workers.] It's just the war was unavoidable. It was everywhere and the photos that were coming out of Vietnam. I felt that it was wrong to be there.
- 02-00:13:13  
Farrell: Yeah. And I mean even not too far away, in the Presidio you've got an Army base and you've got the Presidio Twenty-Seven happening. It's just all around. When you were in high school did you have any early career aspirations?

02-00:13:33

Sasaki:

I went from one thing to another. At one point I thought, "Oh, I want to be an architect," and then I wanted to be a photojournalist. Of course, I think I've always wanted to write the Great American Novel. But I didn't really think practically in any way about what I wanted to be. I had friends who, even as early as high school, they thought, "I want to be a doctor," so they were going to major in pre-med in college. I wasn't like that at all.

02-00:14:07

Farrell:

What made you decide to go to UC Berkeley?

02-00:14:15

Sasaki:

Probably the biggest factor was that my mom had graduated from Berkeley and I never really considered any other school. My sisters had all gone there, so it felt like our university. It was fairly close to home, which I liked, too.

02-00:14:34

Farrell:

Yeah, so it was sort of natural for you to go there as opposed to UCLA or something?

02-00:14:41

Sasaki:

Yeah. I didn't really want to go to Los Angeles. [Lifelong Giants fan...]

02-00:14:47

Farrell:

You started at UC Berkeley in 1970 as an English major. Were you living on campus then?

02-00:14:57

Sasaki:

My first, gee, was it one or two quarters? I can't remember. Possibly the first quarter I was living in a dorm, which I hated. I hated it. I just had this roommate who was constantly hanging around with her boyfriend and her other friend. It was like I didn't feel like I could even go back to my room kind of thing. After that I shared a studio apartment with my sister Susan on the north side of campus, which I liked.

02-00:15:36

Farrell:

Okay. So yeah, you were a little bit north. I know we had just talked about the protest and the tear gassing and things. This is also a few years after the Free Speech Movement. What was the campus climate or culture like for you at your time there?

02-00:16:03

Sasaki:

Well, first of all, I have to say personally when I got to UC there were a couple of things going on. One is that my sister Kathy had just died in March of 1970 and so I started UC about two weeks after that happened. I think really for the first couple of years I was just in this kind of gray zone. I actually remember the precise morning in 1972, March 1972. I woke up and I thought, "Okay, I can go on now. I can move on." But it was like for two years I was sort of suspended. I think that colors my experience at Cal, the first part of it.

02-00:16:51

The second thing is since I had such a stable childhood with the same friends almost all the way through, going to Berkeley, even though it was like, what, twenty-one miles or something from where I grew up, it was a real culture shock because when I decided to be an English major. I think in all the years I was there, I remember probably only one other Asian that was in my English classes. There must have been about seven or eight of us or maybe more who went to UC Berkeley from my high school, my high school class. But they were all in pre-med and business and other things. I never saw them in classes. There was one friend who was a fellow humanity major but she was in history.

02-00:17:52

It was like suddenly I was meeting all these mainly white people who came from all over the place, all over the country, other countries, who looked at me like *I* was the foreigner. One person actually complimented me on my English. That kind of thing. It was just very weird for me. That's the first time I'd ever felt like a minority.

02-00:18:21

Farrell:

Did you find that there was an Asian American community on campus?

02-00:18:28

Sasaki:

There probably was but I didn't have any connection with it. I know when my sister Joan went to college, she went from '64 to '68. The Free Speech Movement was kind of happening while she was there but she wasn't really involved in it. She was very active with the Nisei Students Club. I don't even know if that still existed when I was there. I certainly never knew of it.

02-00:18:58

Farrell:

Yeah. It's a big shift where people are coming in from other countries and looking at you differently coupled with Kathy's death, as well. Is that something that you want to talk about or would you prefer not to?

02-00:19:21

Sasaki:

I don't know that I have to say much about it except that we all felt very close to her, so it was a huge shock. We fought a lot when we were kids and I think it's because I wanted her respect possibly the most. She was the most outgoing of us and made friends very easily so I always thought she'd grow up and have some kind of international job, join the Peace Corps. She was very adventurous, too.

02-00:20:04

Farrell:

Did it help living with your sister?

02-00:20:09

Sasaki:

I think it did, yeah, because she'd gone through it, too. Even though we didn't talk about it very much, I think it was a good thing to do.

02-00:20:23

Farrell:

Yeah. There's a tacit understanding between the two of you. You had mentioned that kind of the fog lifted in 1972. Was there anything that sparked that or you just sort of time had passed?

02-00:20:43

Sasaki:

I think the time had passed. I've actually heard other people who suffered the death of a loved one and they said the same thing. I guess a certain amount of time passes and then suddenly you feel like, "Okay, I can pick up again and I'm back in my life." I can't explain it.

02-00:21:07

Farrell:

Yeah. Yeah. In terms of the classes you were taking in the English department, I think it's really interesting hearing about the demographics and this is also indicative of some of the larger issues within the publishing world, where it's homogenous. Do you remember what kind of books they were assigning you or the writers they were holding up as a gold standard at that point? And you may not remember.

02-00:21:52

Sasaki:

No, I did take a class, I can't remember the guy's name, the teacher. He was a young Black guy and in his class we got to read a lot of the African American classics, which was really great. But it's like there's a special class for that. They're not woven into the canon, right? It was all Chaucer and Shakespeare and George Eliot, all of those people.

02-00:22:27

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah, so all the standard classics. You spent your junior year in England, is that right?

02-00:22:23

Sasaki:

I did. Yeah. I guess I reached a point where I felt that, as an undergraduate, the classes were very large and very impersonal and all this stuff was going on in the real world. I just felt like if I don't do something I'm going to end up dropping out because I feel like this is really irrelevant. What am I doing here? Then I thought, "Well, maybe I'll try to get into the study abroad program." So I did that. It was between Japan and England. I chose England because they speak English. I thought, "I don't speak Japanese. How am I going to survive over there?" I'd also grown up on English literature so I'd always wanted to go there. I ended up going to the University of Kent in Canterbury. Unfortunately, it was maybe a year or two before Kazuo Ishiguro was there, so I didn't get to meet him.

02-00:23:43

Farrell:

Oh, yeah. That had to be, probably when you heard he was coming, like, man, why couldn't this have been a couple of years later. What was your experience like in Kent? Or in Canterbury?



02-00:24:00

Sasaki:

It was my first time I'd been abroad. In fact, I think that was my first plane trip. I'd never been on a plane until then. I had a friend in Oxford from UC and another UC friend who was in University of Edinburgh, so we tried to get together on breaks. Oh, it was kind of strange because there was another Chinese American woman from a different—was she from UC Berkeley? She might have been from UC Berkeley—we didn't know each other—who was also there on the program and it was funny because I went over to her college. We were in different living arrangements. Knocked on her door and she wasn't there so I was like standing there writing a note. Her neighbor, an English woman, came back and said, "Oh, what's wrong?" She called me her name. "Can't you get in?" I just kind of looked at her and I said, "I'm not her." It was so weird.

02-00:25:14

Farrell:

Yeah.

02-00:25:18

Sasaki:

I also had a lot of people ask me if I was an Oriental. I said, "Well, I'm American." They would say, "Oh, you look Oriental." It was like the "Twilight Zone" —and then, of course, a lot of people would see me and assume I was from Hong Kong because there were a lot of Chinese from Hong Kong there because it used to belong to Britain.

02-00:25:42

Farrell:

That's interesting. Yeah, that's interesting. I think that the United States had been going through some of the cultural things but England didn't necessarily go through the same thing so it's interesting the experiences there.

02-00:26:05

Sasaki:

My first day in London I had eaten breakfast in the cafeteria where we were staying and I didn't know if I was supposed to bus my tray or not. I approached a young Englishwoman and asked her where I should put my tray. She looked like startled that I had even addressed her. She kind of looked at me like in panic and she said, "Oh. Oh, I'm sorry. I can't understand you." And I thought—

02-00:26:37

Farrell:

Even though you were speaking English?

02-00:26:37

Sasaki:

I spoke English. It was just weird.

02-00:26:47

Farrell:

Very strange.

02-00:26:48

Sasaki:

I think the expectation of the visual I was providing just kind of overwhelmed people. [The only friend I made that year was an Englishwoman who had an Italian mother. She knew what it was like to be "different."]

- 02-00:26:56  
Farrell: Yeah. Unfortunately, yeah. So you were there for a semester and then you returned?
- 02-00:27:05  
Sasaki: Right.
- 02-00:27:06  
Farrell: Okay. Were you there at the beginning of your junior year or at the end of your junior year?
- 02-00:27:12  
Sasaki: It was my junior year so I was there from September through June.
- 02-00:27:14  
Farrell: Oh, the entire year, okay. I see. That's a long time.
- 02-00:27:21  
Sasaki: It is, yeah.
- 02-00:27:23  
Farrell: Yeah. Did you experience any reverse culture shock when you came back to Berkeley?
- 02-00:27:28  
Sasaki: I didn't. I didn't. Not like when I came back from Japan years later.
- 02-00:27:33  
Farrell: Yeah. It's interesting. I know that you audited Ronald—
- 02-00:27:43  
Sasaki: Takaki.
- 02-00:27:43  
Farrell: —Takaki's Japanese American history. Oh, this was after—sorry, I'm looking at the outline now and realizing it was after graduation. But when you were there, I know this is sort of the beginning of Asian American studies at maybe San Francisco State and not necessarily Cal. But were there any history classes or anything aside from what you later audited that you were finding were available?
- 02-00:28:11  
Sasaki: I don't recall and I don't think there were anything like that. I can't remember if it was my final semester or second to last semester I took a creative writing class, which was unusual because at that time UC didn't have very much in the way of creative writing at all. It was very much English literature. It was taught by a Korean American writer Kim Yong-Ik. It was kind of neat. It was when I was taking that class that I wrote the very first story as an adult that was based on Japanese American experience, which was later included in my book.

02-00:28:54

Farrell: Which story from *The Loom* was that?

02-00:28:57

Sasaki: In the *The Loom* it's called "Ohaka-mairi."

02-00:29:00

Farrell: Okay, and that was another question that I had: During your time as an undergraduate, were you writing then? Were you doing any creative writing?

02-00:29:15

Sasaki: I was the kind of person who always carried a notebook around and would sit down like between classes and scribble in it. I think at one point I tried writing poetry and that was like a real bust. But I was always writing. I was always writing. Just not formally like stories or anything.

02-00:29:47

Farrell: What was that like for you to take the creative writing class your senior year? I'll leave it open for you to answer. But yeah, what was that like for you to take that class?

02-00:30:01

Sasaki: It was fun. That's also the class where I met the second Asian American that I ever had in a class. That was interesting, too, because she was also trying to write based on her experiences. She was Chinese American. But no, I enjoyed that. Of course, that teacher Kim told me, "You have to say more. Your writing is like the bone but you need some flesh." Because my stories tend to be really spare and really short. And he was right. I learned over the years ways to open them up.

02-00:30:47

Farrell: Yeah, that's interesting. And always with writing, at least in journalism, is like show, don't tell, and I think that's getting flipped a little bit now. But interesting, to learn those components or elements. At that point what were your career aspirations? What were you hoping to do after you graduated?

02-00:31:13

Sasaki: I didn't really have specific career aspirations. I didn't go to any counselors to get job counseling. I guess I was kind of a dreamer. I remember seeing one person and she was saying, "You have all these—" I guess I did have ambitions and aspirations. She said, "You have all these ambitions," but she didn't see me like doing anything to like achieve them. I graduated in, what was it—I can't remember when it was. March. Was it March? March or June of 1974. And was kind of coasting. I had two part-time jobs. One was teaching ESL [English as a Second Language] to visiting Japanese tourists. The other was a typing job on campus. I had the idea that I just want to take some time and try to write, so I was doing that. I was working two part-time jobs and starting to write some fiction and things like that. To back up a little bit, I think the whole experience of being in England for a year and being immersed in DH Lawrence, TS Eliot, Shakespeare and all the white men, it

made me really want to know more about Japan and it made me really want to go to Japan at some point.

02-00:32:47

I remember that Christmas when I was in England, a friend of my sister's sent me a little book of haiku and they were illustrated with these simple Zen watercolors. It appealed to me so much. I think I was starved for Asian culture. That's why when I came back I just started in—oh, and I had also—I can't remember exactly when I read this but I read the book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. I don't remember when it was published but it was somewhere in the early '70s when I read it. That really had an impact on me because I had never thought about the way that history is presented and it made me question everything. That's when I became really interested in just knowing more of the facts about Asian American history and so I audited Ron Takaki's Japanese American history class.

02-00:33:54

Oh, and also the summer of 1974. Maybe I'm getting ahead of the curve here. There was this big call for young Asian American actors because the Asian American Theater workshop was starting up and they had this agreement with ACT in San Francisco that there would be all these classes. I went over to the enrollment and it was like hundreds of young Asians buzzing with energy signing up for these classes. It was kind of a really exciting time. That's actually how I met Nancy Ukai. I think you know her? Yeah, because she was taking some of those classes with some of her friends from UC Santa Cruz. We all started hanging out together.

02-00:34:50

Farrell:

What was it about the theater that appealed to you?

02-00:34:53

Sasaki:

Well, I'd always kind of dabbled in drama, doing script writing and being in like—I wouldn't call them plays but productions—actually, in elementary through high school. I think I had the acting bug, partly because I was shy and if you're an actor you have the license to let it all out, right? Plus I had always really been disturbed by the way Asians are portrayed in popular culture. And I guess part of my wish as a writer was to write stuff that was more authentic. Anyway, it all sort of tied together.

02-00:35:53

Farrell:

Yeah. I was going to ask if, given your involvement with theater throughout grade school, high school, and then with the Asian American theater workshop, were you experimenting with screenwriting or playwriting at all?

02-00:36:14

Sasaki:

When you said playwriting I remembered that in the fourth grade I did write a play about Christopher Columbus and the class put it on with the rest of the school. I wrote those short little plays or skits throughout school but not seriously as an adult. Later, when I came back from Japan, I did take a

playwriting course at City College at night while I was working and I had Ed Bullins, who recently passed away. His assignment was to write a scene. I wrote a scene for these two Nisei women meeting in the supermarket and knowing that they know each other but not remembering who the other person is and that became "American Fish," which appears in my book.

02-00:37:10

Farrell:

That's actually my favorite story in *The Loom*. I really loved it. I thought that was great. Sorry, I'm now thinking about that story.

02-00:37:23

Sasaki:

I'm skipping all over the place.

02-00:37:24

Farrell:

No, no.

02-00:37:24

Sasaki:

I'm just making it harder for you.

02-00:27:26

Farrell:

No, no. This is great. These were lots of questions I was going to ask anyway, so this is great. Let me see. When you took Ronald Takaki's Japanese American history class, you had mentioned that you were starved for Asian culture. You read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and really thinking about wanting to learn the facts and how things are presented, coming at writing from an authentic—authentic to yourself and your experience. Two-part question here: first, was it hard to convince him to let you audit the class and then the second part is what was it like for you to take that class?

02-00:38:13

Sasaki:

I don't remember it being hard at all. What was it like for me to take the class? It was kind of nice because we did read things. I actually can't remember if we read *Nisei: The Quiet American* by Bill Hosokawa for that class or if I read that on my own. I do a lot of reading on my own so it's hard to remember sometimes. But it was very interesting for me to read that. I mean I think it's probably a little outdated now because it was written way back in—must be the '70s. It's very much kind of one-sided. It was on the Nisei JACL [Japanese American Citizens League] sort of side. But it filled this huge vacuum because I knew very little. He went back and he talked about the Exclusion Act and the Alien Land Law and all that stuff. It was a good foundation for me. I also remember going with two of my classmates to meet Toshio Mori, who was living in San Leandro then. I don't remember if he had just written or he was writing or going to write his novel about his mother, *Woman from Hiroshima*. But that was kind of a memorable experience, just going over and having donuts there.

02-00:39:56

Farrell:

Who was in the class? What does the class makeup look like, if you remember?

02-00:40:03

Sasaki:

I don't remember. I think it was mostly Asians. The two women I went with to visit Toshio Mori were Japanese American, but I don't remember too well.

02-00:40:18

Farrell:

Did being involved in this class, having these experiences, did that further interest you in visiting Japan?

02-00:40:31

Sasaki:

Absolutely, yeah. I was determined to go there but I didn't want to just visit as a tourist. I looked for a teaching job there and interviewed with a couple of people who were coming to California and was hired by the school The Language Institute of Japan in Odawara. That's how I ended up going to Japan.

02-00:41:01

Farrell:

Where in Japan? What region of Japan is that?

02-00:41:05

Sasaki:

If you take the Kodama, the slow bullet train from Tokyo Station, it was the second stop after Yokohama. It's called the Gateway to Hakone, because that's where you get off and switch to a local train to go to the Hakone National Park.

02-00:41:25

Farrell:

Okay. Was it maybe like an hour outside of Tokyo or farther?

02-00:41:32

Sasaki:

By bullet train forty minutes.

02-00:41:36

Farrell:

Okay, so sort of suburb—a little farther past the suburbs then.

02-00:41:40

Sasaki:

Yeah and it was perfect because it's not Tokyo, which I think would be exhausting to live in. But close enough that you could run up there on weekends and experience it.

02-00:41:52

Farrell:

Yeah. That's true. Were your parents supportive of you going to Japan?

02-00:41:57

Sasaki:

They were but they weren't supportive of me going with the boyfriend that I was living with, not being married. Because we were going together. We went to the courthouse and got the license just to satisfy them.

02-00:42:16

Farrell:

So that was the only part of the situation that they were—they were happy that you were going to Japan, just not under the circumstances?

02-00:42:23

Sasaki:

Yeah. I mean they weren't that happy about the fact that we were living together here. But going to Japan was worse because I'd be meeting their relatives and what would the relatives think, you know?

02-00:42:34

Farrell:

Oh, yeah. When you were there did you end up meeting the relatives with him?

02-00:42:38

Sasaki:

I did, yeah. I had an aunt who was my dad's youngest sister. She was living in Tokyo. I also traveled down to Wakayama and met my mom's cousins and their families, their sons and daughters and children.

02-00:42:59

Farrell:

What was their response or what was their reaction?

02-00:43:02

Sasaki:

To?

02-00:43:02

Farrell:

To you introducing your boyfriend to them.

02-00:43:06

Sasaki:

Oh, he didn't go.

02-00:43:09

Farrell:

Oh, okay.

02-00:43:09

Sasaki:

Oh, wait. Did he go? I can't remember. I think I went by myself. Yeah, I think I went by myself.

02-00:43:18

Farrell:

Okay.

02-00:43:18

Sasaki:

They were thrilled because they knew my mom and she had visited in the '30s and had a very memorable visit with them. They didn't speak a lot of English. And then also their Japanese was Wakayama-ben, which was interesting. But I don't know what to call him, my mom's cousin's son, whatever that is, he just had this comfortable style. Nothing could faze him so he would just continue talking in Japanese. I eventually started to understand him. He didn't freak out if I was speaking English. It was a good visit.

02-00:44:13

Farrell:

That's good, yeah. You were there for two years and you were working as an English teacher. Who were you teaching? What was that experience like?

02-00:44:26

Sasaki:

This was an intensive residential program and so businesspeople would be sent by their companies all over Japan to stay there for one month. They would be in class basically from 8:30 in the morning until 8:30 at night and it was like an English only environment, which wasn't great for me learning Japanese. But it was great in terms of like learning about Japanese companies and Japanese business life. I loved it. It was really interesting. It was kind of like a teaching lab because there were people there from lots of different places, some from the School for International Training. Everybody was trying these different teaching techniques. It was fun.

02-00:45:20

Farrell:

So it was an immersion school for them while you were also being immersed in Japanese?

02-00:45:28

Sasaki:

I never felt like I was immersed in Japanese because we spent so much time at work that we were speaking English. On weekends or vacations we would get to go to Japan.

02-00:45:42

Farrell:

Oh, okay. That's interesting.

02-00:45:43

Sasaki:

Because we were all living pretty near the school. We had to eat some of our meals with the students, too.

02-00:45:51

Farrell:

Oh, okay. Yeah, I can see what you're saying. It wasn't so great for your trying to learn Japanese.

02-00:45:57

Sasaki:

Right. Because they were trying to create this English island.

02-00:46:04

Farrell:

Yeah, like a bubble. Having had all these experiences leading up to your time in Japan when you're auditing this class, you're taking the Asian American theater workshop, really piquing your interest in going to Japan, what was it like for you to finally be there? Did you feel like you were getting closer to your family, to who you are, to your identity, that kind of thing?

02-00:46:35

Sasaki:

That's got many, many answers. Well, in a sense I always kind of kid that when I'm in America I feel more Japanese than American and when I'm in Japan I feel more American than Japanese. I got over there and there were some things that were so familiar to me that I had this emotional connection. I guess I had memories of my dad coming back from his business trips to Japan and some of the things he brought us and some of that kind of thing. Also, I had really gotten into Japanese films in university and liked the films of Yasujirō Ozu, which were mainly made in the late '50s and the early '60s. So



even seeing the department store wrapping paper just brought back all these memories. In a way it felt very familiar. But at the same time, because I have a Japanese last name and I look Japanese sometimes—not the Japanese people I worked with or knew, or the students, but people on the street or people you encounter—didn't know what to make of me. Or they would think something was wrong up here or that I was really rude because I didn't speak politely enough or that kind of thing. I didn't know all of the nuances of being Japanese.

02-00:48:17  
Farrell:

So again, there's some assumptions being made by other people just by looking at you. Yeah, that's interesting. Did your parents ever come visit you while you were in Japan?

02-00:48:28  
Sasaki:

They did. Separately. In 1976 my dad came and that was really a special trip because he and I went to Hiroshima together and he took me to the cemetery in Miyajimaguchi, which is where the ferry departs for Miyajima Island, which was the ancestral home, to my grandparents' tomb there. He took me to, what's it called, Hondori, the sort of shopping area in downtown Hiroshima where his sister—my aunt—had a sweet shop there. We couldn't find it. It was probably gone. He told me about his mother bringing him to the department store there and going up to the top floor and having like one of those boxed lunches. So he had memories. These are things he never told me before but since we were there, they were starting to come out. My mom visited me, I think, later. I think it was 1980, maybe 1980. That was nice because we went to Wakayama and visited the relatives again together.

02-00:50:16  
Farrell:

I see. So your dad came to visit you the first time you were there. Because I know you returned to the US for a couple of years, is that right?

02-00:50:24  
Sasaki:

Yeah, okay.

02-00:50:27  
Farrell:

And then your mom came to visit you the second time.

02-00:50:29  
Sasaki:

Right.

02-00:50:29  
Farrell:

Got it. Okay, okay. Do you feel like those visits with your parents in Japan brought you closer to them or made you understand them a little bit better?

02-00:50:40  
Sasaki:

I think so. I guess with my dad, I don't remember if I discussed this last time or not, because he was Kibe and because of his military experience in the US Army during the war, he had always kept his whole past under wraps. Our whole family, the influence of it was always primarily my mom. The college

educated, the English speaking, the Nisei experience. I felt that because I went to Japan and lived there and started to really like it, that gave my dad permission to share things that he had kept to himself before. It definitely made us closer.

02-00:51:38

Farrell:

What was the reason that you returned for a couple of years during that interlude? Or you returned to the US?

02-00:51:49

Sasaki:

Yeah. At that time the school where we were working, they liked turnover because they always wanted fresh blood. Because the director, it was a non-profit, the director of the school, part of his theory was, "We want the Japanese businesspeople to be exposed to Americans but we also want the Americans to be exposed to Japan." If you keep the same Americans all the time you're limiting. He liked constant turnover and the contract was only for a year but it was possible to extend for the second year and there was an understanding that then you'd have to leave. That's why we came back.

02-00:52:36

Farrell:

What were you doing from '77 to '79, for those two years?

02-00:52:43

Sasaki:

Okay. Came back to Berkeley, starting teaching ESL for UC Extension. My ex-husband and I published an ESL textbook based on some of the, what do you call it, strategies, teaching techniques that we learned in Japan. We self-published it and UC Extension program bought it and used it. They had like a huge program. Also in 1978 I decided I was going to go back to school to get my master's degree. I started going to San Francisco State because they had a creative writing program.

02-00:53:39

Farrell:

Were you getting your MFA then?

02-00:53:41

Sasaki:

No, it was an MA with an emphasis in creative writing.

02-00:53:46

Farrell:

Okay, so were you getting your master's from '78 to '79?

02-00:53:56

Sasaki:

Well, I enrolled and took classes '78 and '79 but then the opportunity came up to go back to LIOJ in Odawara. That was the school in Japan. My husband, ex-husband was offered the directorship of the school and I would be a teacher. We liked it there so we decided to go back so I had to interrupt my master's program. When I came back to the U.S., a couple of years passed, and then in 1986 I decided to just try to finish my master's degree, so I did.

02-00:54:36

Farrell:

Okay, so you were starting those classes and then you went back. You returned to Japan I believe for five years? Is that right?

02-00:54:46

Sasaki:

I was there for five years, yeah. My ex-husband stayed there longer. We split up there.

02-00:54:51

Farrell:

Oh, I see. Okay. When you returned were you working at the same school teaching again?

02-00:54:57

Sasaki:

Let's see. Well, I came back on short notice because—I had just started a new job in Tokyo in a company's English language program. I got the call from my sister's that my dad had been diagnosed with lymphoma and they weren't sure what the prognosis was. I made the decision that I was going to just go back because I could not imagine staying in Japan and planning lessons while my family was going through that. So I had to resign. I felt kind of bad because I'd only been there for two weeks. And packed everything up and then I came back and I think it was February or March of '84. Actually, I didn't have a job lined up or anything because it was so unexpected. This friend, the mother of one of my sister's friends, was an administrator for the San Francisco Community College district. She heard about what was going on and thought it was great of me to come back and support the family so she actually found ten hours at the community college for me to teach, so that's what I did.

02-00:56:24

Farrell:

Oh, great. So you were able to get a part-time job when you came back?

02-00:56:27

Sasaki:

Part-time job, yeah.

02-00:56:29

Farrell:

When you came back were you living with your family?

02-00:56:33

Sasaki:

Yeah. I lived with my mom and dad for a few months and then my sister Susan was moving out of her apartment in Berkeley so I took over her apartment.

02-00:56:45

Farrell:

Okay, okay. What was it like for you to have to leave Japan so suddenly and now here you are back in the Bay Area, to return, especially under these circumstances?

02-00:56:59

Sasaki:

Yeah. I don't know if it was the suddenness of the return or if it would have happened regardless of how I returned. But the culture shock was like horrendous. I knew about culture shock. I had talked to people about it. I

knew what to expect. But still, it was just awful because I came back and everybody here had been here the whole time and I hadn't been. It's like the last five years of my life didn't exist because nobody was very much interested in knowing about it. It was like there was no support for my life that I had had there so it was pretty bad. There were other things that were hard to adjust to, like having to drive everywhere. In Japan we walked. We took public transportation. Also the level of violence in just everyday interactions. It just got me in the gut. Really bothered me. Like somebody opens the car door and it touches the car next to them and the drivers start shouting at each other. It was like horrible to me because Japanese, they bury conflict. They don't show it. So anyway, it took a while to readjust.

02-00:58:27

Farrell:

What do you feel like your time in Japan—I know there's an interlude—but those seven years in total, how do you feel like that impacted you both personally and professionally?

02-00:58:43

Sasaki:

Well, professionally it basically determined the rest of my career. I ended up switching from ESL to intercultural training and working for consulting companies that specialized in Japan/US communication and then all of my subsequent jobs come from the fact that I lived in Japan. Personally, it was also really important because, as I mentioned, I grew up in the Richmond district, which was this sort of paradise and it was sort of like a bubble. We grew up in this sheltered bubble. It was deliberate. My parents created this little Eden to protect us from some of the realities that they had experienced. The result of it, though, is that you grow up and you don't have any sense of who you are or where you came from. One of the reasons I wanted to go to Japan was to find out what it was that my grandparents had come from and where it was that they had wanted to return to. It felt in a sense like I only knew one side of the coin and by living in Japan I felt like I was whole again.

02-01:00:07

Farrell:

Did that wholeness stay with you when you returned?

02-01:00:10

Sasaki:

It did. Yeah, yeah.

02-01:00:14

Farrell:

You had started working as an ESL teacher at community college, as you mentioned. I think when we talked earlier you mentioned that you didn't feel like you had very much job security and it was a little bit less than ideal. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

02-01:00:36

Sasaki:

Well, I was a part-timer. We were limited to ten hours a week except in the summer when the full-time teachers wanted to take a break. We could teach twenty, maybe twenty hours. But at the time most of the teachers there were white women. And because the population of San Francisco was so Asian I

think the district was trying to hire more people of color and more men just to balance it out a little. This was very threatening to the people who were there full-time and the people who were there part-time hoping to become full-timers. People like me who got in there—and given that they wanted to improve the demographics, I was a likely person to advance and get one of these plum jobs—they would give all of us the worst assignments. Like hours split morning and late at night and different locations on opposite sides of the city and all that kind of stuff. There was no job security. You could be laid off at any time. I thought this isn't very rewarding and it's just barely like a survival...giving me a level of being able to survive, pay the rent. I was in a rent controlled apartment. I was really happy when I had the opportunity to move into the corporate sector and work with businesspeople who were doing US/Japan business and needed to communicate with each other better.

02-01:02:51

Farrell:

How did that role come up? How did that opportunity arise?

02-01:02:59

Sasaki:

Well, let's see. This is kind of a long story. One of the previous directors of LIOJ, like maybe the director right before my ex, when he left Japan he started working for this company called Clarke Consulting Group, which was just starting up in the early '80s. They had a contract to train a bunch of managers from a very well-known US company who were coming to the US to learn about the factory there so they could go back to Japan and build a factory in Japan. He was in on this pilot program of intercultural training. Because the intercultural field, there's a strong belief that knowing the language and being fluent isn't enough. You also have to understand the culture, communication style, the business style and all of these other things. So he was there. He had worked there. I had that connection. Although he was not there when I was hired—he was long gone—I knew that they existed so I was able to put my name in. I was kind of surprised when they called and said that they were looking for someone. It was a long commute because I didn't want to move down there.

02-01:04:33

Farrell:

Yeah. It was based on the peninsula, right?

02-01:04:36

Sasaki:

Yeah.

02-01:04:38

Farrell:

Where on the peninsula?

02-01:04:38

Sasaki:

Redwood City.

02-01:04:42

Farrell:

Oh, in Redwood City. Okay, so were you commuting from Berkeley down to Redwood City?

02-01:04:46

Sasaki: Yes.

02-01:04:48

Farrell: How long was that taking you then?

02-01:04:49

Sasaki: When I first started, it would take forty-five minutes. It moved later, a few years later. But it could take anywhere from, at minimum, an hour-and-a-half. I remember once driving home on Halloween night in the rain. It took about three hours. Really awful.

02-01:05:21

Farrell: Nothing like Bay Area traffic.

02-01:05:23

Sasaki: Yeah.

02-01:05:23

Farrell: It's interesting. Working for a place where they felt that knowing the language wasn't enough. Were you working with people and businesses from all different parts of Japan?

02-01:05:41

Sasaki: You mean when I was at Clarke or when I was in Japan?

02-01:05:44

Farrell: Yeah, yeah. Sorry. When you were at Clarke.

02-01:05:46

Sasaki: Actually, both places, yes. People all over Japan.

02-01:05:51

Farrell: Did that require you to learn about the regional cultures from different parts of Japan?

02-01:05:59

Sasaki: Not really because we were very much focused on business. Usually it was a matter of understanding the corporate culture. Most of our clients were large American companies. Trying to help the Japanese managers understand what the corporate culture was and what the values that underlying communication style and business style are and then specific strategies so that they could learn how to style switch. So, for example, just in listening, the Japanese tended to listen very well and not interrupt because interrupting someone is considered rude. But if they weren't understanding what the person said they would just continue to listen and then the American would be really frustrated that the person didn't understand what they were saying and say, "Why didn't you interrupt me? Why didn't you ask?" It's understanding what the differences are, what the expectations are, and then trying to help them learn how to do those things. You can repeat and summarize. There's all these different ways of clarifying in a way that is appropriate and not considered rude.

02-01:07:35

Farrell: How was your Japanese at this point?

02-01:07:40

Sasaki: Well, when I left Japan I was able to have conversations, limited conversations. I'm sure I was nowhere near—stylistically not speaking in a Japanese way at all. I was never fluent. The longer I was away from Japan the less I could do. Almost completely forgotten now.

02-01:08:08

Farrell: Yeah. It's hard if you don't keep practicing. You were at Clarke Consulting for twelve years, from '87 to '99. After that you went to an e-learning company. What was the impetus for your move from Clarke Consulting to the e-learning company?

02-01:08:32

Sasaki: Well, it wasn't a direct move. The recession hit both sides of the Pacific in the '90s so business started getting really tight. Of course, when there's a recession the first thing that goes is training, right? That's the first thing to get cut from the budget. Clarke was not doing well and I continued to do this kind of training for a couple of years as an independent contractor. But I'm not the kind of person who likes to sell myself and market myself. When the opportunity came up to—well, one of the things I did while I was an independent contractor was I learned how to conduct an online class. Because I thought personally that e-learning was going to be the future. Whenever there was a recession, face-to-face training would be the first thing to go but they might continue to invest in e-learning because it's so much cheaper. There's no travel involved, right. I had done that. This opportunity came up to join this company that was an e-learning development company in the area of ESL. They were producing this product that taught English to international employees all over the world. In a way I was like the perfect fit. Although I wasn't all that excited about going back to ESL but I thought, well, I need to survive so this will be like a full-time job. I took that and I thought I can learn more about e-learning, even more than just by teaching an asynchronous online class.

02-01:10:23

But it was a culture shock because I had always worked for companies that were founded and run by educators. Most of the people were teachers, trainers, teachers. And this one, it was a business. It was a real company. They developed a big flagship product in 1999, had a huge content team and then they laid the whole content team off. Most of the company—and it was the biggest company I had worked for—but most of them were like engineers, salespeople, marketing people. Very, very tiny content team. It was a culture shock for me. I learned how to actually communicate kind of with engineers.

02-01:11:20

Farrell: Another style of communication. Sometimes it's not always—

02-01:11:22

Sasaki:

Really. Really. Yeah. A lot of the content people stayed in their little niche and turned out content and then passed it off. It was very much sort of a conveyor belt sort of process. But I'm not like that. I can't work that way. I had to like know what happened before and know where it's going so that I can do what I'm doing better. Over the three and a half years that I was there I gradually expanded what I understood and how to do things. I got to know the engineers. By the time I left I had designed two new products, I mean big products, and I was like bug fixing and doing all that stuff.

02-01:12:10

Farrell:

Yeah. What were the programs that you developed?

02-01:12:13

Sasaki:

One was like a business skills center. Their flagship product was very traditional in some ways. The templates were cool. They were like e-learning templates but the pedagogy was really traditional. It was grammar based. They were teaching vocabulary lists. I looked at it and I went, "Oooh." They had been talking for years about creating some kind of thing that would be more suitable for businesspeople. I thought, "That's right up my alley," because that's what I'd been doing for the past twelve years. I kind of put together not a proposal but I just talked about—this took a while, too, because it was a very male dominated company and content people were like at the bottom of the totem pole. But I kind of invited myself to one of the meetings once and when they were talking about the business skill center I just sort of pitched. I said, "Well, you can do it like this," and then I sort of talked about how they could do this simulation. The production guy, the product manager and the marketing guy and the chief engineer, their eyes just kind of lit up and they went, "Wow." They got really excited about it. We ended up doing that. We did a prototype and then we launched like six modules. The other one was a pronunciation center that had Flash movies and things in it and it focused more on intonation and all that kind of stuff, not just R and L.

02-01:14:07

Farrell:

That's really interesting. You were there for about three-and-a-half years. Does that mean that around 2003 is when you went to Aperian?

02-01:14:15

Sasaki:

2005 actually.

02-01:14:17

Farrell:

2005. Okay, so from there you moved to—I could be saying this wrong, too—Aperian Global?

02-01:14:26

Sasaki:

Yeah. Aperian Global.

02-01:14:27

Farrell:

Aperian Global. You were consulting and you were working on cultural products and did a lot of diversity, equity and inclusion work. Can you tell me



a little bit about what it was like to transition into that company and then maybe what some of your roles were there?

02-01:14:46

Sasaki:

The transition was really easy because it wasn't—well, I guess it was still technical but in a different way. Also a lot of the people there were people who had been associated with Clarke Consulting Group, so I knew them. The timing just worked out because they also had a flagship product that was kind of like an online encyclopedia, cultures around the world. But the guy who was in charge of the web tools really wanted to do more e-learning. I actually saw him at a wedding and he asked me, "Oh, what have you been up to?" Then I told him about the business skills center. He got really excited and said, "You should come by the office and talk." So we talked. Yeah. So I started working there. Sorry, somebody's texting me. It's kind of distracting.

02-01:15:59

One of the most interesting projects I did there in the time I was there was we got a government contract from the Army Research Labs to develop a website to train on the ground soldiers, American soldiers who were going to Iraq. Because this was 2006. That was just a great project. We had nine months to do it. We managed to get interviews with, I don't know, twenty Iraqis who had flown out to Amman, Jordan for a conference. We talked to soldiers who had come back from Iraq to find out what kind of training they got before it and what kind of training they wished they'd had and then we developed this website. For me the most rewarding parts were the branching scenarios where they have to like—it's a situational judgment kind of thing, where they're in the situation and they get these options and they have to pick one. Based on what they pick they go on a different course, depending. They could end up with a really terrible result or a really good one or something kind of in between.

02-01:17:20

Also there was this interactive—we called it "witnesses to history" as a way of teaching people about the recent history of Iraq. I had this cast of, I don't know, six or eight characters, Iraqi and American mostly, and a timeline. Users could click on a year and find out what each person was doing that year. It was kind of history through a very personal filter.

02-01:17:52

Farrell:

As an oral historian, that sounds right up my alley.

02-01:17:56

Sasaki:

Sorry?

02-01:17:57

Farrell:

As an oral historian, that sounds right up my alley. The recent history through personal narrative, you're interviewing people. Also interesting that you're doing sort of a learning based create your own adventure program, as well.

02-01:18:10

Sasaki: Yeah.

02-01:18:11

Farrell: Yeah. That's really interesting.

02-01:18:13

Sasaki: The feedback from our Army contact was really good. She said it was the best one that they had ever gotten in their small business innovation project or something.

02-01:18:30

Farrell: Yeah, so you were working on that project—you had nine months to develop it but then were you working on it for a little longer after or did you move to something new?

02-01:18:41

Sasaki: Oh, I moved to something new. There's always new stuff. There was a lot of requests for country specific e-learning, for companies that were doing a lot of work in a certain country. The diversity stuff started happening a little later, like around 2011, '12, all the way through to when I retired in 2016.

02-01:19:13

Farrell: Yeah. What did you like most about that role at Aperian?

02-01:19:21

Sasaki: I always loved learning new things. Otherwise I get bored with a job. I did so much research on so many different cultures and it usually involved like interviewing people from those cultures. That part was really rewarding. The military project we did was traditional e-learning where we had to hire a designer to design all the templates and all the backend. But later we started moving to rapid authoring software. I could just create the whole thing myself and I loved that. I loved having like the blank screen and then creating this fun kind of thing that actually teaches people something.

02-01:20:13

Farrell: Yeah. It sounds like some of the things that stuck with you from your whole careers, learning and then language and creating. I don't know if there's a question here, just more of an observation.

02-01:20:32

Sasaki: No, that's definitely true. I can't be bored at a job. Yeah.

02-01:20:42

Farrell: Yeah, and what went in to your decision to retire in 2016?

02-01:20:47

Sasaki: Well, I had just finished a year of work on another really fun project. It was for kids. It was on these, I can't remember, six different countries. But that was really fun. The company was making the decision to focus on upgrading its flagship product and making it available on mobile devices, which had

nothing to do with content. I foresaw a lot of boring work ahead, like maintenance and nothing much interesting. I had been thinking for a couple of years about when I was going to retire. Anyway, I thought maybe I'll go halftime, so I went halftime. Then after a couple of months of that I said, "Nah. I'm just going to throw it in." So I retired. But then I continued contracting because there were a couple of projects I needed to finish for clients.

02-01:21:53

Farrell:

Yeah, okay. I'm also thinking for our next session we can pick up with your MA and then go into writing and then we'll talk about Tsuru for Solidarity and the Topaz stories and things like that. Because we're about at an hour-and-a-half right now. Does that work for you?

02-01:22:15

Sasaki:

That's fine, yeah.

02-01:22:15

Farrell:

Okay. Before we wrap up today, I do want to ask you a couple of reflective questions on what we had discussed today.. I'm wondering what it meant to you to have your experience in college, getting more interested in going to Japan and then being there, considering that you carried a lot of those experiences with you throughout your life and your career really. Yeah. What did it mean to you to visit Japan and spend so much time there?

02-01:22:54

Sasaki:

What did it mean to me? I don't think I'd be the same person if I hadn't gone. In some respects I guess my whole life I felt sort of a duality. Like I have one foot in two different worlds, of course Japan and America. Also later I felt like I had one foot in the corporate world and another foot in the writing world because I got my master's degree while I was working full-time. Part of the reason I went back to school is because I was starved for the opportunity to just be around other writers and to talk about writing. Going to Japan was important because, as I said, before that I didn't know who I was. It felt like I couldn't speak up for myself because I didn't know. When I understood that my values that I had been raised with were majority culture values in Japan and were valued, it just changes the whole way you feel about yourself. Because in the US those values, people kind of look down on them or they make you seem weak or they make you seem whatever. They're not the mainstream values. Then you're just kind of a loser. I think in terms of self-confidence it was really important. I don't take guff from anybody. I mean really it gives you ground to stand on and to defend yourself really.

02-01:24:48

Farrell:

Yeah. It sounds like it really helped you be comfortable with who you are.

02-01:24:55

Sasaki:

Exactly. Yeah.

02-01:24:55

Farrell:

Yeah. That's great. Well, I think that's probably a great place to leave it for today unless there's anything else you want to add to this section?

02-01:25:06

Sasaki:

I can't think of anything off the top of my head.

02-01:25:10

Farrell:

Okay, great. Well, thank you so much. This was really wonderful and it was really great to hear about your education, your career, your time in Japan. That was really great. So yeah. Looking forward to the next session.

## Interview 3: January 26, 2022

03-00:00:11

Farrell:

Okay, this is Shanna Farrell back with Ruth Sasaki on January 26, 2022. This is our third interview for the Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Project. Ruth, when we left off last time we had started to talk about your writing career. We talked about your full-time career and what was bringing you income, but I would love to talk to you a little bit more about your writing. We had also discussed how you had started writing when you were a kid and you were writing stories about horses and taking some creative writing classes and the theater workshop and things like that. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your experience writing in the '70s and '80s and what kind of stories you were writing and themes you were exploring?

03-00:01:07

Sasaki:

Sure. Well, the first story I ever tried writing based on Japanese-American experience was in 1974 and I had no success getting that published. I guess I just really wanted to try to bring that experience into the fabric of American literature because it was missing really. I think all Japanese Americans just felt that our experience was just invisible and any time I saw a Japanese American character in fiction, which was not at all often, I felt really sensitive about how that character was portrayed. I was so happy to find Lee in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, for example. [And VERY disappointed when that character was not included in the film version.] I guess I just felt this need to create empathy because Japanese Americans grew up in the United States and we learn all about the mainstream culture. We read the literature and we see the popular culture but the mainstream culture, there's nothing about us. I was tired of feeling like a ghost in my own country and I thought it's time that I opened up and we, artists and writers, opened up our world and invited other people in, whoever was willing to take that step, so I tried writing based on my experiences from that point on and finding very little success getting published.

03-00:03:00

Farrell:

I know that writing is a pretty solitary internal process, but were you finding inspiration from others to work on these stories, whether that's through the Asian American theater workshop or through some of the classes you were taking or your time in Japan? Or was it just something you really felt this personal push to do?

03-00:00:33

Sasaki:

I think it was more of a personal push because I didn't really know any other writers. I mean that was one of the reasons why, in 1978, even though I was working full-time with a long commute, I decided to enroll in the creative writing program at [San Francisco] State, because I just needed to be around other writers to talk about stories. So yeah, it was just a personal push that I pretty much felt all my life.

03-00:03:53

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. In these stories you're exploring your identity and your experience. Were there any themes related to that that you were really trying to write about during those years?

03-00:04:14

Sasaki:

Well, that's a hard one. Because I think the themes were sort of submerged and that was the whole point of trying to like excavate what's going on there. For me I guess the overriding push, and I think I mentioned this in our past conversations, is that I was born after everything happened, right, seven years after the incarceration, after the war ended. I was one-and-a-half years old when we moved out of Japantown and were no longer surrounded by the community, so I grew up in this—I don't say vacuum because I had a very happy childhood but I felt like I needed to fill in the blanks, maybe even more so than my sisters because they remembered our grandparents. They grew up somewhat in Japantown. When people talked about people in the community, they knew who they were talking about and I didn't know who the person was. Things like that. I felt this real need to fill in some of the blanks and just find out more about I guess what my grandparents had gone through and who they were.

03-00:05:45

Farrell:

What was your process of writing and exploring those things like, especially given that you were also working and trying to balance your time?

03-00:05:57

Sasaki:

Well, let's see. 1974 I was kind of coasting because I had graduated from UC Berkeley earlier in the year and I just kind of had two part-time jobs which were enabling me to exist in Berkeley in those days in a rent controlled apartment. I didn't have like career aspirations, like going to med school or becoming a lawyer. I thought I really want to write so I'm going to take this time to just try to write and get published. I forgot your question, sorry.

03-00:06:37

Farrell:

What your writing process was like then.

03-00:06:38

Sasaki:

Oh, process, okay. I had two part-time jobs and I guess for me the process was always something, usually something that happened or something I saw or something I heard would sort of trigger images and then all these emotions would start coalescing around those images or that event or whatever. I'd have to like try to set it down because I really wanted to capture that feeling or convey that emotion. I would try to create a sequence of characters or a sequence of events that would enable the reader to experience the same thing. I didn't have like a regular every morning from 8:00 to 12:00 or anything. It was very haphazard.

03-00:07:39

Farrell:

When the moment struck?

03-00:07:41

Sasaki: Yeah.

03-00:07:41

Farrell: Yeah, and were you starting to work on any of the stories that later were published in *The Loom and Other Stories*?

03-00:07:52

Sasaki: Absolutely, yeah. I think I wrote the first draft of *The Loom* in—what year was that? Oh, that one came later. I think it was in 1978. Thanksgiving 1978. Yeah. I was living in Berkeley so I would go home periodically to visit my parents and so once when I did that my dad drove me back to Berkeley and on the way he dropped off my mom at her weaving class that she was taking in Fort Mason and she told me to come in to meet her friends so I went in. What I was really struck by was here was a world where my mother had friends and it had nothing to do with her being my mom. She'd always been mom and she was always there when you came home from school and she didn't really have a separate identity. That really impressed me and I went home and I started writing *The Loom*. The first draft was like five pages and over the years it expanded. So, again, I lost the question.

03-00:09:20

Farrell: Well, that's okay. I was wondering if you had started working on any of the stories that were later part of *The Loom*?

03-00:09:24

Sasaki: Oh, yeah. Okay. So *The Loom*. Also I think the story *First Love*...—I remember writing a first draft of that somewhere around 1975 and it was written in the first person. Had a great first line. But I finished the first draft and I thought, "It's not there yet. I don't really know what it's about yet." Years later, maybe in 1982 or something, I was in Japan and I picked it up again. Totally rewrote it, third person, and realized what it was about. People always comment how funny it was and how they enjoyed it. I guess I see it as a tragicomedy about assimilation. That one also started from an image, the image that is captured in the final part of that story where she visits the ex-boyfriend's grandmother's house to deliver a Christmas present from her mother. Yeah, anyway.

03-00:10:37

Farrell: When we were talking in some of our earlier sessions about when your parents lived in Japantown, I was thinking about the house from that story and was pulling in elements from your early life or your family's life with that house there. I was like, "Oh, I wonder if the house was inspired by that."

03-00:11:02

Sasaki: Yeah. It absolutely was somebody else's grandmother but it's still that connection and those kind of traditional expectations that the narrator cannot meet.

03-00:11:15

Farrell:

Yeah. It's also interesting, too, like thinking about if you're too close to something or you just need more time to figure out what is this about or where things are, because I do feel like that story in particular really captured a time. I got a real sense of that. It's interesting that you—I don't really know if there's a question here—but that you took a step back and came back to it later and maybe because you were in that time period, needing to reflect a little bit on it to make it full. But I don't know, that was just my experience as a reader.

03-00:11:55

Sasaki:

I think that's absolutely true. I always joked that it takes me so long to write stories because I need to let them compost. Sometimes that process takes years.

03-00:12:05

Farrell:

I like that terminology. I might start to use it. Composting. In the '70s and the '80s, before you started in your MA program at San Francisco State, where were you trying to get published and what do you remember about that process? Did you have to mail a hard copy in or know an editor or something?

03-00:12:30

Sasaki:

Well, yeah. I didn't have a computer until the late '80s. Yeah. We would have to mail in double-spaced hard copies. At the time I really didn't know much about publishing so I would try all of the women's magazines that published fiction. And not just women's magazines. Of course, the *New Yorker*, which was like "forget it." *The Atlantic*. And then there were all these magazines like *Redbook*, which published a lot of fiction. *McCall's*, *Mademoiselle*. That's probably where I went wrong, because I didn't actually read those magazines. I didn't read women's magazines. But they were one of the big markets for fiction, short fiction. I also submitted to some literary journals and I applied for grants or fellowships or awards some multiple times. Nothing. I remember usually it would be just a little form rejection slip. But I got quite a few personalized handwritten message, some where the editor couldn't spell and I thought that was kind of funny. I guess *Redbook* I submitted *The Loom* and they kept it for quite a while and I got a note saying they had recommended it for further consideration. I thought, "Oh, great." After another month or so I got a, "Well, we're very sorry but we regret that, although the story's beautifully written, it's not ideally suited to our readers." So then I thought, "Ah, okay." I started calling rejection slips the beautifully written but syndrome because I got a lot of letters like that.

03-00:14:22

I remember, I think, it was *McCall's*, I submitted *First Love* and they said, "Well, we enjoyed the story and it's well-written but it's really too young for our readers. Try—" what was the—I can't even—*Seventeen* or something. No, maybe it was *Mademoiselle* that I submitted it to. So I submitted it to *Seventeen* and they said, "Well, it's too old." I thought, "Okay. I give up."



03-00:14:53

Farrell:

Were you getting any more specific feedback aside from, "It's beautifully written," but not for our audience kind of thing?

03-00:15:02

Sasaki:

No. The editor who couldn't spell suggested that I develop a minor character or something which had nothing really to do with the story. Not really.

03-00:15:15

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. How did you take that when you were getting those rejection slips? What impact did that have on you?

03-00:15:32

Sasaki:

Well, it didn't discourage me from writing but it did discourage me from submitting for publication. Yeah. Most of this happened before *The Loom* was published. I guess it was in 1991, I was thinking of just giving up writing, just stopping completely. I thought, "Well, I'm going to try one more time to get the collection published," not individual stories. Gather a bunch of stories together and try to get the whole collection published. I wrote query letters to three publishers and got a call from Graywolf. I was just thrilled because the reason I had approached them is because I spent a lot of time in those days in Black Oak books in North Berkeley and had noticed their beautiful paperbacks. At the time they were promoting multicultural literacy and they had these books about stories from the American mosaic. I read the foreword to one of the books, I can't remember which one it was, where the book buyer at—was it Elliot's Bay in Seattle? —Rick Simonson had written and he was saying something like the problem is that people from—I can't remember his exact words. But people from these communities, underrepresented communities, can't get past the editors, who are mostly mainstream white editors. The mission at Graywolf [Press] was to get good writing into the hands of readers. I thought, "Yes! I like these guys." That's why I approached them.

03-00:17:40

Farrell:

Yeah, that's interesting and I do want to talk more about that in a minute. But before we get there, I would love to hear more about your MA program. I know you started in the '70s and then went to Japan and then ended up coming back and finishing. I'm wondering what it was like for you to come back. Were you doing the program full-time or was it part-time?

03-00:18:06

Sasaki:

No. I was taking one or two classes in the evening a week. That's why it took me so long to finish the degree.

03-00:18:15

Farrell:

Okay. Because you were working full-time at this point?

03-00:18:17

Sasaki:

Well, before going to Japan, from '78 to '79, I was teaching ESL in Berkeley, which was not a full-time job. I was taking two—I don't remember if I ever

took three. But anyway, I took at least two classes each semester that year and after I came back, from 1986 to 1988 and then I did my thesis and orals in '89, I took only one class a week because I was working full-time with a long commute.

03-00:18:48

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. Especially if you're commuting down to the peninsula and then have to go back to the East Bay. Yeah, that's a long commute.

03-00:18:54

Sasaki:

I was actually stopping on the way home to go to class.

03-00:18:58

Farrell:

Yeah, the little triangle there. You had started some of these stories in the '70s. What was it like for you to return—not return necessarily but to workshop them in this context? And what was some of the feedback you were getting from either your professors or fellow students?

03-00:19:28

Sasaki:

It felt really good to get them workshopped because I hadn't really shared them widely before. I remember I showed one of the early stories to a Nisei acquaintance, a friend of the family, and he read it and his reaction was, "Well, who's going to want to buy this?" I thought, "Oh, thanks." His wife was very encouraging. She was trying to compensate for that sort of blunt comment. To get it workshopped with people who are not Japanese American was really an opportunity because I didn't want my writing to be restricted to a Japanese American audience. Part of the whole thing is to open our experience to non-Japanese Americans so it was really valuable for me to get that because as far as I remember, I think I was the only Japanese American in most of the story workshops that I participated in. And, of course, the feedback was mixed. There were people who gave really good comments and there were people who—it was like, okay, ignore that one. You sort of learned through the process whose feedback to really pay attention to and which ones to really kind of ignore. That goes for the instructors, as well. I had one woman instructor who read a story that was set in Japan and she said, "This neighborhood just sounds too idyllic." She had never been to Japan and that was the neighborhood I had lived in. Things like that. I just said, "Okay, forget that." But there were also instructors who were actually very good. I recall Leo Litwak. He had this technique that I came to really appreciate, where he would start the discussion of a story simply by summarizing it. No judgment, no comment. He would just summarize the thing. It's amazing, when you listen to that, you suddenly see all these, wait, that's weird. Or you see all these questions and issues and problems. So that was really good. Also, later my thesis advisor was Michael Rubin and he was great. He's the one who asked some very good questions about the twelve-page version of *The Loom*, which caused me to go back and rewrite it and the final version was twenty-two pages. That's the one that got published.

03-00:22:16

Farrell: Did you feel supported by the faculty that was there?

03-00:22:21

Sasaki: I did in the story feedback, especially the two that I mentioned. It was hard to like really get to know people because we were only there like once a week at night. State is actually that kind of a school. Most of the students I think are older people who are working. They don't live there. They just stop, like me. That was fun, too, because I got to know some of them a little. Some of the other people would show up in more than one class and that was kind of fun to have a very brief but supportive community.

03-00:23:06

Farrell: You had mentioned before that you were wanting the community and that's part of the reason why you decided to go to SF State. Do you feel like you got that community at the end of the program?

03-00:23:18

Sasaki: It wasn't a thing where I had friends that I stayed in touch with. But it was more of just people to really talk about writing with and, again, as I mentioned, it was hard to develop a close community because you only saw the person once a week and big class and that kind of thing. But I did feel that it gave me the opportunity to get away from the corporate world, where nobody was a writer and to talk to other writers. I am the kind of person, I needed a push. I needed a deadline or I needed an audience. It's very hard to just continue being motivated just kind of sitting and writing when you don't think your writing's ever going to be read by anyone.

03-00:24:11

Farrell: Yeah and that's a question that I do have, especially with some of the things that you're writing about, some of the themes of the story, some of the topics. Your sister's death shows up in a few of the stories that are in *The Loom*, thinking about your identity. I think even your relationship with Japan in some of them, as well, too. What was that like for you? I have two questions about this. The first one is as you were writing these stories were you feeling like it was cathartic at all? I don't want to be too leading here, but how did it feel for you to write these stories?

03-00:24:57

Sasaki: It's very cathartic. I think I mentioned last time that when I came back from Japan in 1984 I felt very isolated because people weren't really interested in what I'd been doing for seven years or five years. The second visit was five years. I didn't feel there was anyone I could really share it with and so being able to write about some of that was very good for me. It was like therapy really, and kind of exploring it to see what it meant to me and that kind of thing. I think it was really good.

03-00:25:40

Farrell: Okay, a way of processing things, too, it sounds like.

03-00:25:43

Sasaki:

Right, exactly. I sometimes joke that something hasn't happened until I've written about it.

03-00:25:51

Farrell:

I've felt that. As you were starting to publish these stories, what was it like for you then to have such personal stories become public and they're out there in the world?

03-00:26:07

Sasaki:

I didn't have a problem with it. I guess the first time a story of mine became public was in 1983. That's when I was still in Japan. I had from a distance submitted it to the Japanese American National Literary Award that they did every year. I submitted *The Loom* and it won. It won that award. I know in the contract it said something like, "We reserve the right to publish it wherever we see fit," but I really didn't expect them to put it on the front page of the JACL's national newsletter new year's edition. That's big. I thought, "Oh, my God." Because I wasn't home. I was in Japan. I thought I didn't have time to warn my parents that this was coming down so there were a bunch of phone calls. I remember my sister, one of my sisters saying, "We think it's neat that you write, Ru, but do you have to write about *us*?" It was actually really difficult. Really difficult because my family's the most important thing to me in the world and that's probably why I write about it so much. And yet, of course, they felt exposed. Even though all of it's not true. You start with certain things and then you have to kind of elaborate and makeup and deviate from the truth to make the story work. But the problem is that when people read it, they assume that it's all fact. It's just hard. I think that's the only story my dad ever read because he passed away in 1984.

03-00:28:10

Well, maybe I'm jumping ahead, but after *The Loom* was published my mom—she's amazing, because I know that that story really was hard for her to take. I tried to explain it's a tribute to Nisei women of that generation but I also understood that the little details along the way sometimes can be very painful. She really came around to being very supportive, to the extent that she would like carry flyers from my book around in her purse in case she ran into somebody and then she would like give out flyers. It turned out okay. There's still a question, I think, with my sisters.

03-00:29:04

Farrell:

Okay. Your parents, were they members of the JACL? Were they getting the magazine in the mail?

03-00:29:11

Sasaki:

I guess so. They must have because they certainly received it.

03-00:29:22

Farrell:

You just mentioned that it was a little bit more difficult with your sisters. Do you remember what the conversations were like when they read some of your stories?

03-00:29:29

Sasaki:

Well, I mean, I already told you that one quote. I think for them it was a matter of being protective of our parents, not so much of themselves. [I was off in Japan, but they were here and witnessed my parents' devastation at the sudden exposure first hand.] I know my other sister would comment to people about the sisters in *The Loom*. She would say, "Oh, they're all Ruth." I would support her. I said, "Yeah, they're all like parts of me," to protect them, right. Actually, I think they got a little more used to it but it's hard to say.

03-00:30:07

Farrell:

That's always a good answer. They're all parts of me, instead of saying, "Yeah, it's about you." I know a couple of years before *The Loom and Other Stories*, the collection was published in 1991, you did publish *Wild Mushrooms* in 1988 and then *The Loom*—the story *The Loom*—separately in '89. What was that like for you to see those stories in print? What did that mean to you?

03-00:30:44

Sasaki:

It was really great. It's like really the first time to be published in a wider than Japanese American forum. *Wild Mushrooms* was first published in San Francisco State's literary magazine, *Transfer*, and then at the reading somebody from Chronicle Books—no, not Chronicle Books—Fiction Network, the Short Story Review, which became Fiction Network later, was in the audience. He wanted to publish it in Short Story Review, so it came out there. And then *The Loom* was first published in the *Making Waves Anthology*, which was writings by and about Asian American women. It was very good to see that. It kind of gave me hope.

03-00:31:40

Farrell:

And, in fact, after it was published in *Making Waves*, it was reprinted in *Push Cart*, one of their prize editions for best of small presses.

03-00:31:50

Sasaki:

Right. That came, I think, the year after *The Loom* was published, the book.

03-00:31:56

Farrell:

Yeah. What was that like for you to be in a best of?

03-00:32:00

Sasaki:

I was thrilled.

03-00:32:08

Farrell:

Do you remember, as you're reaching a wider audience than just the Japanese American community, what some of the reception to your work was by people outside the community?

03-00:32:16

Sasaki:

I got comments from people, a gay fellow, who wrote and said even though it wasn't about being gay, he could really relate to a lot of it as a minority. An Indian American woman, actually more than one, they just really responded to it. I think a lot of people, even though they were not Japanese American, identified with that struggle to be seen in this culture.

03-00:33:00

Farrell:

Yeah. I think, too, you do a great job of illustrating family dynamics, too, and people who are white and part of the mainstream culture and are not used to what it feels like to not be part of that, can relate to the universal themes that are coming out of that, as well.

03-00:33:22

Sasaki:

There was one comment by a Caucasian reader who said, "I lived in San Francisco and this book revealed a whole different San Francisco than I knew existed." I thought that was good.

03-00:33:36

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. You wrote the three query letters to different publishers and you had a good feeling about Graywolf, it sounded like. Well, I guess I should back up. When you were submitting that query letter did you have the entire collection ready to go to send them?

03-00:33:59

Sasaki:

Let me try to remember. I can't remember if *Seattle* was already written. I think it was. Yeah, yeah. I think it was. I think I did, yeah.

03-00:34:15

Farrell:

Okay, okay. What was it like for you—so then it's accepted, to work with an editor there, especially in this context, where now you're working on a collection and not a single short story for a magazine? It's going to be its own thing. I would just love to hear about your experience.

03-00:34:36

Sasaki:

Well, working with Graywolf was really wonderful. I didn't meet Scott Walker and Chris Faatz, who was the marketing director, until later, after the book was already out. But they were both so nice. I remember they always send you a writer's questionnaire to help market the book. I knew nothing about how publishing worked but I did read something about how many new trade paperworks are published every year. It's a very small number and the shelf life was something like one month or something. It was very kind of not a very promising picture. What I did is I tried to read about the publishing process so that I understood how everything worked so that I could time my input. I would do that. I would work with them and try to let them know about readings I set up on my own. They set up a reading for me in Seattle and I think two or three in San Francisco. I would like go around to stores and see if they had my book and if they didn't have my book I didn't have the guts at that time to go up to them and say, "You should buy this," but I would send them

the postcard. If they did have it I'd offer to sign it. At that time some people would ask me to do a reading and so I did. [I also suggested using a visual of a woman weaving, from an Edo-era Japanese screen, for the cover. Graywolf was receptive so I had a Japanese friend help me secure permission from the museum to use it. But I remember Ellen Foos at Graywolf saying, "Wow, I'm going to put you on my short list of writers that we like working with." It was a very, very productive and friendly collaboration.

03-00:36:36

Farrell:

That's great. It sounds like you felt like they were helping you with the marketing even though books have a discouragingly small shelf-life window there. But it sounds like it was a pretty collaborative relationship with the promoting.

03-00:36:56

Sasaki:

It was. Graywolf started out in Seattle and they have a lot of respect and contacts in the literary community. I think that was great. The other thing that I really admired about them is they keep their backlist alive forever so my book is still in print. It's like what, how many years ago? Is it thirty years ago or something? Yeah.

03-00:37:25

Farrell:

Yeah. What was it like for you to do a reading in Seattle?

03-00:37:34

Sasaki:

It was great. I got to meet the guy, Rick Simonson, who wrote the foreword to the book that inspired me to submit to Graywolf. It was a nice, nice crowd with maybe a reviewer or two in the audience. I also did some radio appearances when I was up there.

03-00:37:52

Farrell:

How did you feel about the radio appearances, being interviewed on the air about the work?

03-00:38:00

Sasaki:

I enjoyed it. I had always been shy and I was not a public speaker. But I think working as a trainer in my whole career helped a lot. And then especially with the book. I realized this is my five seconds of fame, I'd better take advantage of it because I really wanted people to read more Asian American literature and publish more Asian American literature. I enjoyed being interviewed except when I was misquoted later. Oh, this is for newspaper articles. I would often read the article and there was a sentence that made no sense and I thought, "Oh, my God, did I say that? Maybe I did."

03-00:38:52

Farrell:

I understand. Out of *The Loom* and other stories, out of the collection, two of those stories were selected for—maybe at the time it wasn't NPR—but Selected Shorts, which is now on NPR and those were both selected as part of it. The concept with Selected Shorts is that there's a program—I think pre-

pandemic they used to do these live—and this is for the uninitiated. A celebrity or an actress or somebody who has a public profile would read the stories around this theme. It was Freda Foh Shen that read the stories, is that right?

03-00:39:41

Sasaki: Yeah, read the stories, right.

03-00:39:45

Farrell: Out of that *Seattle* and *American Fish* were both read. What was your experience having your work selected for Selected Shorts?

03-00:39:54

Sasaki: Again, I was thrilled and I remember when one of them aired. It happened to be at a meeting with some coworkers and we all interrupted the meeting to turn the radio on. I mean that was pretty thrilling. When the other one was aired I think I was actually at my mom's house and we listened to it together. Unfortunately, I think it was the *Seattle* story, was read with kind of an accent, the mother's character, to make her sound like an immigrant. I was just mortified because the whole point of that collection is the Nisei generation trying to be American and they're not immigrants, they're not foreigners. After it ended I was apologizing to my mother because she's listening to this. And then I said, "I'm going to write a letter to tell them that I didn't like that." My mother said, "No, no, no. Don't write a letter. Don't write a letter."

03-00:41:08

Farrell: So she was understanding about? It's not like you had control over that, but she was understanding about it?

03-00:41:13

Sasaki: Oh, no. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, she was totally understanding. But she didn't want me to make waves. I think her view was I should be grateful to them for broadcasting my story.

03-00:41:28

Farrell: Yeah. But I understand, too, you don't want someone you care so much about to be a caricature either.

03-00:41:37

Sasaki: Right.

03-00:41:38

Farrell: And then *American Fish* was also turned into a short. What was your involvement in that project and what was it like for you to see your story then on film?

03-00:41:56

Sasaki: Okay. I was contacted by Jesse Wine. He was a Korean American. He was a filmmaker just starting out and he had made a few short films and he had read it in a class at the University of Washington and thought it would make a great



short film. I don't think we had email back then. Can you believe it? No texts. We must have written letters. That's hard. I think we talked on the phone several times, just so I could get a sense of him. He sent me one of his short films, which was quite abstract. I thought, "Hmm." We developed this kind of good relationship and I thought, "Yeah, that's fine." He promised he would not add any car chases or shootouts in back alleys so I thought, "All right, go for it." I wasn't involved at all in the filming because it took place—I think it was in Uwajimaya in Seattle. He added a lot of dialogue to it, in the film, to sort of lengthen some of the scenes. But I thought he did a pretty good job. The only thing I noticed, which I never told him, is the Nisei women shouldn't be wearing shoulder bags. They should be carrying handbags.

03-00:43:24

Farrell:

Yes. A detail that you would know. Yeah, that's interesting. Also, am I correct in that you won a few awards—writing awards—as well?

03-00:43:42

Sasaki:

Writing awards. Well, just the Pushcart Prize and the Japanese American National literary Award that I mentioned.

03-00:43:46

Farrell:

Okay. I'm also wondering, subsequently, after *The Loom and Other Stories* are published, it's out in the world, what was it like for you to write after that?

03-00:44:04

Sasaki:

Well, I did continue writing. I did get a story published in *Story* magazine, a story called *Harmony* [which told the story of a Japanese American girl and her Black piano teacher, based on my aunt's childhood memories.] I also published a collection of short creative nonfiction pieces called *The Dictionary of Japanese American Terms*, which is now on my website. That was published in an anthology edited by Sylvia Watanabe. But, again, I actually started getting contacted by people. Lois Rosenthal contacted me and asked me if I had anything to send her and that's when I sent her *Harmony*. Originally she read it and she thought, "Well, no, that's not quite what we're looking for." I guess she felt it wasn't Japanese American enough. I wrote back and I said, "Well, it's not about being Japanese American. It's about being American." She read it again and she took it. I give her a lot of credit. I also was contacted by a couple of agents, both white women. One was in Boston and one was in the Bay Area. I met with both of them. Yesterday, in preparation for this interview, I was trying to remember when did I meet with the woman in Boston. When did I go to Boston? I cannot remember. But the one in the Bay Area read several of my pieces and her reaction was, "Maybe it's not possible for one writer to capture the Japanese American experience." But she didn't feel that my stories did.

03-00:45:54

Farrell: It's really interesting, especially given that she contacted you and then to have that feedback. She's not really meeting you where you are. She's expecting something different.

03-00:46:11

Sasaki: Yeah.

03-00:46:13

Farrell: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about that? A little bit more about what you were finding agents, editors, publishers? How they were representing Japanese American stories or your feelings about it?

03-00:46:27

Sasaki: Well, I guess my feeling is that before the *Joy Luck Club* was published, people simply felt that there was no market. No matter how good something was and how well it was written, there just wasn't a big enough market to justify publishing it. If they did, they would do like one a year. It might be, "Oh, we've already published our Asian American story." After the *Joy Luck Club*, everybody wanted mother/daughter immigrant stories and if it didn't fit into that little niche then they didn't think it represented the Asian American experience. I think the stories I wrote about before the war or *The Loom* got a little bit more interest than stories I wrote about after the war or subsequent generations. Because of course those are not Japanese enough. So yeah, it was frustrating because I just felt that there's this obstacle that people from underrepresented communities have to get over or get through and it's the gatekeepers of culture, the editors and the agents and publishers who were at that time primarily white. If you don't fit into their idea of what our experience is, then they just can't relate to it as being what they think it should be.

03-00:48:12

Farrell: What were you finding specifically their idea of what the Japanese American experience was and how it should be represented?

03-00:48:26

Sasaki: We didn't get into specifics but I really felt that they were looking for what's weird or interesting that makes it different. Do you know what I mean? What makes Japanese culture and Japanese people different from Americans and that's not my aim at all. I'm not in that place.

03-00:48:53

Farrell: Yeah, and, in fact, those narratives I think can do a lot more harm than good. You're not really helping lift voices that way.

03-00:49:00

Sasaki: Right.

03-00:49:01

Farrell: Yeah. I had read in another interview that you gave about how you're finding that people really wanted to reduce the Japanese American story to time in

camps and not thinking about other aspects of other life. How are you encountering that?

03-00:49:22

Sasaki:

I felt that anytime anybody wanted me to speak or something, they always wanted me to speak about the incarceration. Like the after-the-war stories got zero interest. And before-the-war stories—anytime it's a Japanese American story you expect the incarceration to figure into it somehow, whether it's actually set there or whether it's immediately after, showing the aftermath or whatever. To me that was so limiting. I thought it was important but I personally never wanted to tell that story because I didn't think it was my story to tell. I wasn't there. I was so cautious, I guess, about misrepresenting something I didn't fully understand. It's quite a complex experience. The prospect of trying to capture it and convey it was something I didn't feel I was up to at that time which is why I always wrote about before-the-war stories or after-the-war stories. In fact, I had two collections in progress that I eventually kind of gave up on.

03-00:50:55

Farrell:

Yeah. This is making me curious about how this experience and some of the feedback you were getting from those agents and things, how that impacted your feeling about writing and your desire to continue trying to work with that publishing machine?

03-00:51:11

Sasaki:

Well, I don't think it discouraged me from writing but I did gradually, partly because I was so busy—I had the full-time job, the commute and then also increasing elder care responsibilities—I just didn't have the energy to try to publish anymore. I didn't have the motivation or the energy. I just kind of stopped that. But I kept writing and having stuff on my hard drive that I wasn't doing anything with. Which is why it was so much fun to create my website and publish all those little pieces in 2015.

03-00:51:56

Farrell:

Yeah, I definitely want to talk a little bit about that. But that also, I feel like, leads into Topaz Stories and also what you were talking about, about not feeling like you're the person to tell that story. With Topaz Stories you're helping shepherd these stories into the world.

03-00:52:13

Sasaki:

Exactly, yeah.

03-00:52:15

Farrell:

Yeah. In an effort to kind of move chronologically before we get there, I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your first visit to Topaz in 2003 and what that experience was like for you?

03-00:52:31

Sasaki:

Well, my sister and I heard of this opportunity to go with a group of, I don't know, maybe thirty to fifty other Japanese Americans. We asked my mom if she wanted to go. She was, I guess, in her eighties then. Her response was, "No. I have no desire to go back." Which is fine. That was fine. I understood. She hated hot weather. She had memories of Topaz as being hot and dusty. There was no reason for her to go back really. Joan and I went. It was a good experience. I have to say that compared to many other Japanese Americans who go back and they have this need to go every year, especially survivors, I didn't feel that. I almost felt like going once was enough. But what I really enjoyed, I think, was the bus trip, believe it or not. Because it's a long drive through Nevada and so we had nothing to do but talk to each other and because I'd been working in the corporate sector for so many years—there are very few Japanese Americans working in my companies. Small companies, mostly white. My first company had some Japanese trainers but that's different from Japanese American. It was more of an international thing. I didn't feel very connected to the community at all. For like thirty years I had very little connection. Since the church days in San Francisco. For that was a highlight, really, meeting all these people who were all different ages. Other Sansei women with their mothers or a Yonsei writer or a 442 vet. There was a journalist from Japan who was very interested in our experience and got all of the Sansei and Yonsei together to interview us. It was a very good experience. It was nice to feel that connection.

03-00:54:57

Farrell:

Yeah. That's great. I was going to ask about if you felt more of a connection to the Japanese American community after that pilgrimage, but it sounds like you did.

03-00:55:07

Sasaki:

I did, yeah.

03-00:55:09

Farrell:

What was it like for you to visit the site? Did that make you feel more or less or kind of the same connection to your family's heritage, your family's history?

03-00:55:25

Sasaki:

I think I've always felt that connection. Visiting the site didn't really impact it that much.

03-00:55:34

Farrell:

How about with your sister? What was it like to have that experience with Joan?

03-00:55:41

Sasaki:

It was fun. I don't really know what to say about that. We enjoyed the trip so it was a good experience.

- 03-00:55:55  
Farrell: Had she been before?
- 03-00:55:57  
Sasaki: No, that was her first trip, too.
- 03-00:55:58  
Farrell: Okay. Have any of your other sisters been?
- 03-00:56:03  
Sasaki: Let's see. My other sister—
- 03-00:56:07  
Farrell: Has Susan been?
- 03-00:56:10  
Sasaki: Yeah, she went in 2018.
- 03-00:56:13  
Farrell: Okay, so she went after you.
- 03-00:56:15  
Sasaki: Yeah, okay. We all went in 2018.
- 03-00:55:19  
Farrell: Yeah. What was the significance of that trip? Did it change anything for you?
- 03-00:56:29  
Sasaki: It didn't really for me. The main objective of that trip was to see the Chiura Obata exhibit at the University Art Museum. I guess my sisters and I didn't really talk about it that much afterwards. I don't really know how it impacted them.
- 03-00:56:49  
Farrell: Okay, okay. Did that trip make its way into your writing at all?
- 03-00:56:55  
Sasaki: No.
- 03-00:57:01  
Farrell: This is kind of a time jump. But I know you're working in like 2003, in between the time where you are publishing your website. But if there's anything writing wise you want to add, you're very welcome to. Otherwise I was going to ask about the impetus for wanting to start your website and put things out there.
- 03-00:57:29  
Sasaki: Well, I think the impetus was that my Aunt Kiyō passed away at the age of 102 in 2015. She was always the family storyteller. Every family gathering she'd start talking about the old days. She had some great stories. She had such an interesting life. That I realized when she died, because over the years I had listened very carefully and asked questions and as soon as I got home I'd

sort of write down notes because I knew I'd forget details. I had all these notes filed under different titles like—Chicago, Topaz, that kind of stuff—and I just realized if I get hit by a car tomorrow, these stories are going to like die. I thought, "I need to get them out there." That was the impetus for starting my own website. I think it was in 2017—I can't remember if it was '17 or '18—I started publishing a series of her stories, Kiyō's stories, in chronological order from her childhood through camp. I had another series going of letters that we had discovered in my mom's things after she passed away that her friends had sent her when she was in Tanforan and Topaz. Unfortunately, we didn't have any of her letters but she had kept a few letters from friends. I started a series on letters, camp wartime letters. I think all of that was a desire to just get it out there, so if something happens to me or my computer or the cloud, they won't be lost.

03-00:59:33

Farrell:

Yeah and some of those stories, including the one about your mother's letters, eventually make it to the Topaz Stories. Is that right?

03-00:59:42

Sasaki:

A couple of the letters did. There's one called "Good Friends" and there's another called "Left Behind." Wait. "Left Behind" isn't in the exhibit. But they're all on the website. I think most of them did make it because *The Oda Boys* shows several of the vmails that my mother saved from her adopted brother who was in World War II and wrote a lot of short messages.

03-01:00:18

Farrell:

Okay. Oh, wow. What was it like for you to put the website together and put these stories up there? Were you finding that people were reaching out to you who were interested or could identify in some way?

03-01:00:36

Sasaki:

Well, it was fun for me because I knew nothing about WordPress. I had worked in e-learning but I hadn't really worked with WordPress. That was a learning curve. Also, I didn't really publicize the website. I just sent an email out to some friends. It's nothing like Topaz Stories. Topaz Stories is much more public. But people, I don't know how they found it, but a lot of people eventually made their way there. I've heard from some of the readers. Some say, "Oh, I saw you read at such and such," or "You visited our class." Some people contacted me. Actually, it was the Utah Poet Laureate, Paisley Rekdal, contacted me through that website and that's how the whole Capitol exhibit started.

03-01:01:41

Farrell:

Yeah, can you tell me a little bit more about the Capitol exhibit?

03-01:01:46

Sasaki:

Well, let's see. Yeah. Paisley contacted me about a digital project she was doing and she wanted to include some Topaz related literature. We agreed that she would publish *The Loom* in her project. I told her about the Topaz Stories

project but she was not interested in what she called oral history. Personally, I think it's not oral history. It didn't occur to me to like explain that at the time. But I asked her, "Do you know of any venues in Utah that might be interested in hosting an exhibit?" Because we had already done the one at J-Sei in Emeryville and wanted to expand. She introduced me to Max Chang, who is a businessman and I think he's a Taiwanese Utahn. He was born in Utah and he was also on the board of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Transcontinental Railroad celebration. His big mission is to get more diversity into education in Utah. He had this ax to grind, that celebrations of the Transcontinental Railroad never showed the Chinese workers in photos. It was all the big wheels and people. He was great. He happened to be coming to Berkeley the next weekend. We had breakfast together. He was very excited about the collection and he had contacts in the Capitol so he got the ball rolling. It was originally scheduled to open in June of 2020 but of course it had to be postponed because of COVID.

03-01:03:46

Farrell:

Yeah. This is my fault—we're jumping around chronologically—well, with the Topaz Stories project, so your sister was active in Friends of Topaz and it's my understanding—and please correct me if I'm wrong—that she was going to write a story and she had asked you for help and it kind of evolved that you started to spearhead the project.

03-01:04:28

Sasaki:

Yeah. It was actually the museum's fundraising letter, year-end fundraising letter. Somebody from Friends of Topaz recalled an anecdote that my sister had told her about my mother and she [the FOT friend] drafted a letter sharing the anecdote. My sister, with no explanation, suddenly emails me with the letter and said, "I think you could write this better." I read it and I thought, "It doesn't sound like my mom at all." I'm very protective and territorial about my mother. I wrote back and I said, "You want me to take a stab at it?" They said yeah so I rewrote it and people thought it was great. They ended up sending that out and then at that time, Ann Tamaki Dion asked me if I might be interested in helping them with the Topaz Stories Project. It was great timing because that was the end of 2017 so since the election of Trump in 2016 I had been becoming much more of an activist and attended so many protests. In fact, I had attended one dressed as a 1942 Japanese American with a bunch of other people to kind of emphasize that we've been through this and we don't want it to happen again so it was perfect timing. I thought, "Oh, great." Also, as I mentioned before, I'd never wanted to write about the incarceration but this was, for me, the perfect way to get those stories out there. And so yeah, I signed on and have been working on it ever since.

03-01:06:21

Farrell:

How were you recruiting people to share their stories?

03-01:06:27

Sasaki:

Well, we started out by twisting the arms of all our relatives or anybody we knew. [I mean, almost every J-A we know was in camp or had family in camp.] Like I knew a couple of people in San Francisco through the church that I thought might have a story so I reached out. Anybody we knew that we could think of in our own personal networks. I kind of joked that I think we should have a Topaz Stories workshop with open registration because we need to find some stories but from people who are not related to us. I wanted to get like a diverse mix. I didn't want it all to be like from one point of view or whatever. We had that workshop in October of 2018. Had about fifteen people show up. That was really good because we actually got about four stories that are in the exhibit from that. People who we knew, they started contacting their networks, so it's kind of word of mouth. A lot of it was done virtually. I haven't even met some of our contributors in person.

03-01:07:51

Farrell:

That's right. I mean the pandemic. Yeah, that's really interesting. But also, I think, probably, too, leading up to that. The world is increasingly more digital. If you can't easily fly to Arizona or something you can meet virtually.

03-01:08:07

Sasaki:

Yeah. Fortunately, most of the people we collected from are in the Greater Bay Area. Most of the Topaz people were from here so yeah.

03-01:08:18

Farrell:

Was there any criteria that you were looking at as you were recruiting people or trying to curate some of these stories?

03-01:08:28

Sasaki:

Well, it took us a while to narrow it down. Because when I joined the team I had all these questions, like who's the audience? What's the medium. How are you going to deliver and share the stories? I think the team didn't really have a clear picture at that time because they only had a handful of stories, which were their own family stories. One of our team members had seen a book called *Humans of New York* and that was her vision. She wanted like a great visual with a little short accompanying text. Unfortunately, because of the prohibition on cameras in camp, there aren't a lot of great photos so that part was hard. But we did get some really, really great ones, a few really great black and white photos that were taken in camp that had never been published before. My theory is that a story should be as long as it needs to be so I didn't like to put a word limit on it. For the exhibit, of course, there has to be a word limit because there's a certain vertical height that spaces can accommodate so there are no long pieces in our exhibit. Some of them are very short but the length really varies. But I think what I'm looking for anytime somebody tells me what they're thinking, is I'm looking for that trigger, that core, that central image that we can arrange the rest of the story around. Something that makes a story. Something that's personal, not a news report or a resume.



03-01:10:11

Farrell: Yeah, like the engine that drives a story.

03-01:10:13

Sasaki: Right. It's the feeling really. I want to know how the person felt and what it means to them and sometimes it takes a little bit of digging to get that out. It was very much a back and forth process.

03-01:10:28

Farrell: Yeah and it's interesting, on the website, too, I really like that it's a mix of survivors but also descendants. It's not just one thing. It's a myriad of stories. Also in terms of the photographs, there are, as you mentioned, some that hadn't been published before but also there are some that are from pre-war, post-war. There are marriage photos, that kind of thing. I might be wrong but I feel like I remember scans of letters and things like that. It's lots of materials there that I think if it were just camp photos, that could be reductive. But because you are capturing these photos in different times of people's lives, painting a fuller picture. I'm wondering, as you are working with some of the contributors, what your experience was like now working as an editor and trying to help shepherd those stories and work with them to find that engine, to find that feeling to drive the story?

03-01:11:33

Sasaki: It was great. I don't know if they thought so. But for me, as a writer myself, I've taken a lot of feedback and so I think I've developed a fairly tactful way of delivering it. Usually I try to mess as little as possible with their material. There are degrees. Some people sent me something and I said, "That's ready to go." I didn't have to do anything. Other times I might say, "What do you think about starting with this instead and then letting it unfold because that creates some suspense." Might be a little order thing or it might be cutting out some details that I didn't think added anything. Stuff like that. I tried not to tamper with their voice. That's why the review process of the content for the exhibit was stressful for me, because people wanted to change things that actually changed the contributors' voices. I was very firm about that. We'll make punctuation changes if you insist. We'll remove the space around the em-dashes but I'm not changing the person's voice.

03-01:13:07

Farrell: As an oral historian I very much understand and appreciate that, and as a writer, as well. Voice is incredibly important. Were there moments where you needed to help a writer find their voice?

03-01:13:17

Sasaki: I don't think it's the voice that we needed to find but sometimes we needed to find what the overriding—not message, because these aren't fables or anything with a moral—but the center. The center of the story. [The reason why it's *this* particular incident or memory that the contributor wants to share.] Sometimes I would have to ask for more details. More details than I actually needed just so I could see the whole better but it was a very rewarding experience. I think

overall the contributors were happy to have their stories shared because their motivation, I think in most cases, was they were paying tribute to their parents or grandparents or whoever was in the camp and to bring their stories to a wider audience was very satisfying.

03-01:14:26

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. It's a big deal. In the workshop, who were you seeing as the participants? Were there any survivors or was it mostly descendants?

03-01:14:44

Sasaki:

There were survivors. Yeah. Yeah. There were quite a few actually. We opened it up. We just said if you have a Topaz story. We ended up with—I can't remember off the top of my head but most of them were either survivors or descendants. We had someone who was born in Topaz before the hospital was open and someone who was like two to five years old in camp. We had several survivors although I can't remember exactly how many.

03-01:15:25

Farrell:

Yeah. Also, I believe that Jonathan Hirabayashi was a participant in the workshop?

03-01:15:32

Sasaki:

He was. Yeah, yeah. We were so thrilled when he signed up because I said, "Who is this guy? Does anybody know him?" Nobody knew who he was. I thought, "Yes! He's not related to us." He had a great story about his parents courtship in Tanforan. When we were preparing for the J-Sei exhibit, like around March or something in 2019 he happened to mention that he had worked as an exhibit designer for the Oakland Museum, did we need any help. We said, "Yes!" And I don't know, he may regret it now, but he's been working really hard for us ever since.

03-01:16:19

Farrell:

Yeah. That's a very serendipitous thing. That's great. With the graphic designing background, the Oakland Museum, that's perfect. So he helped with the J-Sei exhibit?

03-01:16:28

Sasaki:

Yes.

03-01:16:30

Farrell:

I think for that one you had selected about twenty stories. Is that right?

03-01:16:33

Sasaki:

Right. That was about as much space as we had.

03-01:16:38

Farrell:

Okay. What was the reception like when you opened the exhibit?

03-01:16:42

Sasaki:

It was really positive. I think about ninety people came to the opening program. It was a wonderful event because people were there reading the stories. We had provided these sort of high chairs in cases people wanted to sit while they were reading because a lot of the attendees were in their eighties and nineties; and we had binders for the stories that we didn't have room to exhibit and so people were sitting at tables reading the stories and then people were like chatting with each other and networking. I just thought the whole point was to really bring people together. I think everybody is looking for an opportunity to share and it was also great because we found a lot more stories from that exhibit.

03-01:17:41

Farrell:

Is the Topaz Stories collection growing? Are you still actively taking stories?

03-01:17:46

Sasaki:

It's still growing. We had about, I can't remember exactly, maybe fifty-six stories at the time of the J-Sei exhibit. We now have seventy. I'm still accepting stories because, as far as I'm concerned, as long as they're out there... Yeah, so we're still accepting stories.

03-01:18:12

Farrell:

That's great. I do know that there were some newspaper or radio pieces that came out that were promoting and highlighting the Topaz Stories collection, which is fantastic. Did you feel like that helped grow your audience or even attract new contributors?

03-01:18:33

Sasaki:

It really did. There was an article in the *East Bay Times*. A lot of people who came to the exhibit came because of that article. So yeah, I think the publicity helped a lot.

03-01:18:49

Farrell:

One thing that you mentioned that I do want to go back to a little bit was around 2016. The election and the things that followed, including the border separation. Did you participate in a march around Lake Merritt in 2008?

03-01:19:15

Sasaki:

Yeah. It wasn't a march. It was just a big protest. It was 2018, around June or something. It was just a big protest. It was 2018. It's around June or something. There was a big protest there and that's the one where we dressed up as World War II Japanese Americans. We got a lot of press from that, too. It was amazing. I had created a little cage using a Target wire bin, a storage bin that looked like a cage with little dolls inside like children and one was lying down covered by aluminum foil. I wanted a sign that would like be visceral, not just a "stop incarcerating kids." There was also a sign that said something like, "My family spent 3.5 years in a camp. It wasn't a summer camp," because at that time some people [i.e. some (GOP) politicians, were comparing the tent cities at the border with summer camps]—it really stopped

traffic. So many people came up to us to take pictures. We had Jewish people, Holocaust survivors, coming up to talk to us. I've never had that much interest or attention in a protest. We made the newspapers. That was the first border separation protest that I had attended.

03-01:20:44

Farrell:

Yeah, and then in 2019 you flew to Oklahoma to protest border separation and that was part of Tsuru for Solidarity, is that right?

03-01:20:54

Sasaki:

That's correct. It was in July.

03-01:20:58

Farrell:

July, okay.

03-01:20:58

Sasaki:

Oh, June, I'm sorry, June of 2019. Tsuru worked really fast because they only heard about the impending incarceration of something like 1500 kids at Fort Sill about ten days before the actual demonstration so they pulled it together really quickly. About twenty-six of us flew out to Oklahoma and there was like a press conference at the gate at Fort Sill, which I think was really impactful because we had like six survivors from various camps and then a lot of other people. Twenty other people. All they wanted to do was to just share their story and explain why they were there and, of course, the MPs were trying to make us move and they were threatening to arrest us. I was thinking that's not a good visual, arresting these little old ladies who are obviously not violent. But everybody risked arrest because we didn't know if we were going to get thrown into jail. After the press conference, there was like a rally at a public park in Lawton and we were joined by two or three hundred allies from all different groups—the Native American community, the Latino community. Black Lives Matter. There were Holocaust survivors and just people from the area. That really impressed me because that was my first visit to Oklahoma so I didn't know what to expect. I met these two young Caucasian women who had driven all the way up from Texas to attend the rally. It made a big impression on me because I felt they were grateful to us for coming to their little town to raise the visibility of the issue and their issues and the speakers were from all of the different groups and they were great speakers. It was almost the perfect example of solidarity in how people always say, "Well, we're not free until we're all free." It was like all of us getting together and mutually speaking out so it was really an effective protest, I felt. Tsuru deserved a lot of credit for organizing that.

03-01:23:50

Farrell:

What impact did that experience have on you?

03-01:23:53

Sasaki:

Well, I think it really motivated me. I guess it was also great seeing how the survivors were able to turn their own trauma into something productive and something meaningful. I think, not just on me, but I think it really energized

the entire Japanese American community across the nation, which traditionally only like small segments here and there have been activists. There have always been activists but it wasn't like a mainstream thing to do. People who I knew, who I never imagined going to a protest, were suddenly joining in and protesting so I think it was really important and really, really impactful.

03-01:24:45

Farrell:

Were you seeing a lot of the younger generation there?

03-01:24:51

Sasaki:

Yes, there was. There were quite a few younger Yonsei or maybe even more. I'm not sure.

03-01:25:01

Farrell:

Yeah. I feel like some of the conversations I've been hearing is that a lot of the younger generations are very active in wanting to raise the attention and very interested in their heritage.

03-01:25:15

Sasaki:

Yeah and that gave me a lot of hope because I thought when we go it'll still be alive. It was very encouraging to see the younger generation get out there and get involved.

03-01:25:30

Farrell:

In your experience at Lake Merritt and then also in Oklahoma, you had mentioned a couple times that the Jewish American community was there and some Holocaust survivors. You know, as a writer, that language matters and there has been the controversy over the term concentration camp. But I'm wondering if that ever became part of the conversation or something that you were thinking about—that term, the impacts of language, the word choices that you were making—during these protests, during your interactions, or even as you're working on *Topaz Stories*?

03-01:26:20

Sasaki:

Well, I think actually at the rally I was talking to a fellow who was wearing a Holocaust Museum t-shirt and I can't remember if he himself was a survivor or his relative or something. But an *LA Times* reporter saw us together, took a picture, because I was carrying my cage, and asked about that. He came out very strongly to say that the Japanese American camps in World War II were concentration camps.

03-01:26:52

Farrell:

The reporter or [the protestor]?

03-01:26:55

Sasaki:

No, the Jewish fellow that was interviewed with me.

03-01:26:58

Farrell:

Interesting, okay, so it was pretty simpatico. There was no antagonism?

03-01:27:05

Sasaki: No, not at all.

03-01:27:06

Farrell: Interesting. Yeah.

03-01:27:07

Sasaki: For myself, I think I had kind of, even before that protest, understood the power of language and euphemisms and in the Topaz Stories project it was tricky because I wanted to preserve the language that the contributors used and in that era everybody called them internment camps. Everybody said, "We were relocated or evacuated." Anytime they spoke I preserved whatever language they used. If they used concentration camp, I kept it. But in any commentary I would use my preferred terms, forced removal or detention center or concentration camp because that's what they were.

03-01:27:57

Farrell: Yeah, yeah. It's interesting to hear you talk about those experiences and those choices from your perspective. I appreciate you sharing that. Thank you. I'm wondering a little bit about the impact that working on Topaz Stories has had, becoming involved in this activism. What impact did that have on you? I know this is pretty recent. It's all that's happening and then the pandemic hits so it's not like a lot of these things can continue. I'm curious about how it had impacted you?

03-01:28:43

Sasaki: Well, I think it has kind of focused me and given me a concrete direction to devote my energies toward. Because I had just retired at the end of 2016 and so for the first few months I was just kind of experimenting with how I wanted to structure my retired life. It involved a lot of volunteer activities and things. But it just all came together. The protesting, the incarceration stories, and the link between the issues we were protesting against and the incarceration. It really helped me actually survive the lockdown because I had this to work on.

03-01:29:43

Farrell: Since you're working on these things and you're having these conversations, you're working with a community during the pandemic, with the rise of hate crimes and that kind of thing, was that something that was on your mind?

03-01:30:02

Sasaki: Oh, definitely. We kind of completed the content review process with the Utah Capitol Preservation Board and Topaz Museum in March of 2020 in preparation to open in June and then everything was put on the back burner. That review process had been so stressful that I just said, "I'm taking a break. We're not opening in June. We don't know if we'll ever open so I need to get away from this," so I actually did very little related to the project for almost a year. Of course, in early 2021, there were all those attacks against Asian Americans. I just thought "we have to get these stories out there." They're just

sitting on my computer. I had actually been advocating for a website since 2018 or maybe it was early 2019 but the museum was kind of against it. We couldn't get a clear answer on whether they supported it or not. I think the vision was that they wanted to put the stories on their website so people would go to their website to read the stories. But nothing ever happened. About every year I would check in and say, "How's that going? Are there any plans to like get moving on that?" There never were so I kind of reached the end of my rope with all the anti-Asian attacks and I said to our local team, "We need to get those stories out there. It's time." I actually went ahead at the end of March and bought the domain name because I thought, "I'm just going to create the website whether or not—I don't care. It's going to happen." Ann Dion managed to get the okay for us to create it ourselves so the whole month of April I was holed up building the website and that was really fun. It was really fun. A couple of days before launch I gave access to the rest of the team here and asked them to like click on everything to test it, see if everything works because we all have different devices. The only device it didn't work on was my eight-year-old iPad. I thought, "Okay, that's probably good enough." But the anti-Asian violence was a definite catalyst. We launched on May 1<sup>st</sup>, in time for Asian Pacific Islander Heritage month.

03-01:33:06

Farrell:

What did it mean to you to help people tell their stories and put them out into the world, especially at this period of time?

03-01:33:15

Sasaki:

It's very rewarding because I think a lot of the people, especially in their eighties, nineties—and, actually, one of our contributors is over a hundred now. They want their stories to survive them so I think they feel a kind of relief. "Oh, good. It's out there now. I don't have to worry about it." For me it's been very rewarding. I sometimes think it was my way of not replacing but filling the hole that was left when my elders passed away. Because I feel like I have a bigger family of elders now.

03-01:34:10

Farrell:

What are some of the things that you are most proud of? Whether that relates to your work in any capacity or just in life in general? What are the things that you're most proud of?

03-01:34:25

Sasaki:

Most proud of, hmm. That's a good question. Well, I think one of the things I love the most is taking like a blank page or nothing and then creating something, whether it's e-learning or Topaz Stories website or the website on the culture of Iraq with simulations and things or anything. Any chance that I've had to be creative and to actually implement the creation and share it, I think those things give me a lot of pride and satisfaction.

03-01:35:23

Farrell:

What has it meant to you to have such a long writing career and to be able to share your stories in such a way?

03-01:35:36

Sasaki:

It's wonderful because I had a lot of stuff written that no one was reading because there was no outlet for it. Maybe my team thinks I'm obsessive but I enjoy it when I see pictures of people visiting the exhibit and reading stories. It's just thrilling to me. Very satisfying.

03-01:36:06

Farrell:

What are your hopes for the future of representation of Japanese American and the nuance, the broad experiences, not just so myopic, but in literature and media? What are your hopes for the future of that?

03-01:36:28

Sasaki:

Well, I know in the past there were always little, brief timespans when the door would crack open a little bit and a few works would get out there and there'd be this interest and then it would die down and then we'd have to wait like twenty or thirty years for the next crack of the door to open. Right now I think there's an awful lot of interest. There are a lot of people from underrepresented communities creating work and getting attention. The internet has helped. You can like get attention that way. Social media. I'm hoping that it's going to be a sustainable movement and that it won't fizzle out after a few months, as it always has done in the past.

03-01:37:18

Farrell:

Yeah, or move backwards.

03-01:37:21

Sasaki:

Yeah and I think the more people from these communities who get into positions of power, the better because then they will be the gatekeepers.

03-01:37:36

Farrell:

Right. What's your hope for the future of Topaz Stories?

03-01:37:42

Sasaki:

Well, I'd like it to travel, to be seen in many different places. I personally would love to see it go to Japan. But I think it might be even more important for it to go to other parts of the United States.

03-01:38:01

Farrell:

Yeah, that's a good point, especially where there's still not a lot of knowledge about this history.

03-01:38:13

Sasaki:

Or even England or Europe would be good, too, because right now the issues are happening everywhere—this wall of hate and exclusion. I'd just like to see Topaz Stories get a wider audience. We have so far been visited by people from thirty-four countries, the website, so that's encouraging.



03-01:38:37

Farrell:

Yeah, that's incredible. I think that might be all the questions that I have for you unless I missed anything or you want to add anything.

03-01:38:50

Sasaki:

I can't think of anything. Thank you so much for your patience and listening to me talk on and on.

03-01:38:58

Farrell:

Thank you for sharing all of this. It's been my pleasure and I really feel privileged to have gotten to talk to you and hear about all this. I appreciate everything and your perspective and insight and all of your work, too, so thank you.

[End of Interview]