

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: REVEREND SHUNJO SHIRATORI, Buddhist priest, Haleiwa
Jōdō Mission

Shunjo Shiratori was born in Nagano, Japan on March 21, 1911, the son of rice farmers. Not wanting to become a farmer himself, Shunjo went to Taisho University in Tokyo, aided by a bishop of the Buddhist Church. In 1937, he came to Hawaii as a Buddhist minister to do missionary work.

During World War II, Shunjo, like other Japanese priests, was interned in a Mainland camp. After the War, he resumed his position at Makiki Jōdō Mission for one year before transferring to the Haleiwa Jōdō Mission.

Shunjo married in 1939 and has three children. At present, he also teaches at the Haleiwa Jōdō Mission Japanese language school.

Tape No. 1-69-1-76

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW*

with

Shunjo Shiratori (SS)

September 20, 1976

Haleiwa Jōdō Mission, Haleiwa, Hawaii

BY: Perry Nakayama (PN)

PN: This is an interview with Reverend Shunjo Shiratori on September 20th, 1976 in a room in the Haleiwa Jōdō Mission. Reverend Shiratori, could you tell me about your life in Nagano, Japan?

SS: I was born in Nakagomi-machi, Minamisaki-gun, Nagano-ken. Nearby are the volcano mountain Asamayama and the river Chikuma. It is the place where the famous Japanese novelist Shimazaki Tōson wrote the "Chikumagawa no Sketch". After the elementary school, I went to Yokohama and finished my high school there. During my college years, I commuted every day to Tokyo from Yokohama. I majored in English Literature at the University. You may say that my admiration for Professor Hajime Matsuura's character had rather influenced me towards majoring in literature. Professor Matsuura took over after Mr. Soseki Natsume and became the English Literature Department Chairman at the Imperial University Women's College, Waseda University and Tōyō University. I was deeply impressed by the religious nature of his literature like the "Bungei no Higan" and "Bungei no Zettai Kyō" which prompt me to select Professor Matsuura's English Literature Department. My home is Komioji Temple in Yokohama. This is a Buddhist Church. This temple was founded by Mr. Shozaemon Yoshida who was the father of former premier Shigeru Yoshida. My Shisho--master--was a resident minister in the Komioji Temple. After graduating from the University, I was teaching at the high school in Yokohama. One day I met with Bishop Fukuda who came back from Hawaii. He told me about the situation of the missionary and the churches in Hawaii. Since then I became very interested in missionary work.

PN: Could you tell me, like, what did your parents do in Nagano-ken?

SS: My parents were farmers. I didn't wish to become a farmer.

PN: Your father use to grow rice?

SS: Yes, he did.

PN: Did you help your father on the farm?

SS: No. I didn't help because I was too young.

*After the taped interview, Rev. Shiratori made written additions which have been incorporated into the transcript.

PN: Could you tell me something about, like, what kind of house you lived in and....

SS: My house was a straw-thatched one. When winter came, it was very cold. So people needed to keep warm. Usually the roofing was all straw and the wall was of muddy plaster like a concrete wall. There was a fire place, kotatsu, in each room. It kept legs and hands warm.

PN: To cook and everything?

SS: Cooking was done in the kitchen. There was a fireplace which was different from the kotatsu place. The door is called shoji, made of paper, and the floor is tatami--a mat.

PN: What kind food did you eat?

SS: The main part of the meal is rice. For breakfast, we had rice, miso soup, and pickled vegetables. For lunch, nokorimono (leftovers), and for dinner, we had cooked fresh-water fish and dried fish as side dishes. The dried fish was sent from Tokyo or Nigata-ken where it is near the ocean. Fresh fish was never sent from there because the trains had no air conditioning.

PN: Within Nagano, you walk around to different place? No bicycle or anything to take you around?

SS: I never walked to far places by myself except when the elementary school teachers took us to excursion once a year. We could not use the bicycle because our fathers had to use them.

PN: When you were a young boy, what kind of games did you play? Or sports or....

SS: Well, the sports played were baseball and heavy gymnastics. In the winter, we had ice skating. For games we had Onigokko, hide and seek. Sometimes we played Irohakaruta.

PN: What is that?

SS: It is a deck of cards which has the words of the Japanese alphabets. This deck of cards is divided into two sections. The first section has sentences written on which one of the players hangs on to and reads it to the other players. The second section has the first syllable of each of the sentences which is being read. There is one card for each sentence and each alphabet. The cards which has the alphabets are spread out on the floor on a table and all the players must try to find the syllable of the sentence just been read and pick it up. The person who has picked up the most cards is the winner.

PN: Oh, not like Hanafuda, then?

SS: No, it is not like Hanafuda. It was never played by the children, only

by the adults. Sometimes, it was used for gambling.

PN: Oh, because that's gambling?

SS: Here in Hawaii, I was surprised to see the children playing Hanafuda. In Japan, the children never touched or played Hanafuda because we were taught that only adults or gamblers played Hanafuda.

When I was a young boy, we children had to walk to school in rain or snow. The school was about four miles from home, but in those days there were no bus or cars in our town.

PN: Oh, yeah?

SS: Sometimes we didn't want to go to school because of the long distance. To distract our mind from our bad thinking, we played the game of the boat race. There was a small stream by the road near the school. We children made a small boat out of a leaf and threw it in the river. We watched the boat float in the river and we followed it until we arrived at the school.

PN: You just watch the boat go down?

SS: Yes, we watched the boat. This was a good memory.

PN: Good fun, then? How far away was the school from your house?

SS: About four miles. It was alright to go to school when the weather was good, but it was very hard when the weather was bad, especially when the snow was falling down. We wore short rubber shoes so the road felt slippery from the snow.

PN: And you bring home lunch to school?

SS: Yes, we bring home lunch with rice and salty salmon. When winter time came, each family pounded rice and made ricecake. We brought ricecake instead of lunch. Toasted ricecake became hard when left in the lunch box until lunch time. So every student laid their lunch box around the stove in the classroom. When lunch time came, the ricecake was warm and soft. On the stove there was a kettle used to serve tea to the teachers and students. At lunch a boy and girl served tea to the class.

PN: They choose the students to go serve?

SS: Yes, they do.

PN: Now I want to ask little bit about, like, what kind of events or customs did the village celebrate? Like obon and New Year's, they had celebration?

SS: Yes, we had some events. Among them, the Autumn Festival was a very interesting and happy occasion.

PN: What did they do during Autumn Festival?

SS: After the autumn harvest--as if they were waiting for this moment--the farmers go all out to celebrate the Autumn Festival.

PN: How do they celebrate?

SS: During the day, parents and children gathered at the school playground for their athletic meet, playing relays, rope pulling, wrestling, etc. Children who participated in the various games received awards. During the night, various floats, including floats with geisha girls dancing, go winding through the streets. Also on the banks of Chikuma River, beautiful fireworks are displayed.

PN: What about your college?

SS: My college is called Taisho University which is located at Toshima-Ku, Tokyo.

PN: So you dorm at the school?

SS: No. I commuted from Yokohama to Tokyo every day.

PN: By train?

SS: Yes, shosen densha, by the electric car, I attended the college for five years. But I was in the boarding room for one year to prepare for the graduation thesis.

PN: Who would pay for, like, your---oh, you stayed at the church?

SS: My master and Bishop Shuntatsu Miyashita paid for my whole school and living expenses. The Bishop did not have any children, therefore, he loved me as his own child. He gave me higher education. He also educated and trained four other boys as his disciples.

PN: So you say you talked to a minister and your master gave you permission to go to Hawaii.

SS: Well, first I asked my master if I could go to Hawaii as a Buddhist minister. He answered that I had to decide for myself choosing either to stay in Japan or leave for Hawaii. After much consideration I decided to come to Hawaii.

PN: You came to the Honolulu Jōdō Mission at first?

SS: Yes. In 1938 I came to Hawaii and stayed at the Honolulu Jōdō Mission, Makiki Street. In 1940, Rev. Kyodo Fujihana was transferred to the Maui Jōdō Mission. To replace him, I was sent to the Ewa Jōdō Mission. I stayed for only one year, before World War II began.

PN: What were you doing on December 7th, 1941?

SS: On December 7th, in the morning I woke up and was preparing the Sunday morning service. About 7:00 or 7:30 a.m. I heard a loud sound of bombing at Pearl Harbor. I thought that the U.S. Navy was holding bombing practice. But I saw an airplane flying over the gas stand of the Standard Oil Company in Ewa. I recognized a rising sun mark on the body of the airplane. Then I turned the radio switch on. I heard the news that a war was breaking out between America and Japan.

PN: What was your reaction when you found out it was Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor?

SS: I did not know what to do. But it came to my mind that I must realize that I am a minister and whatever action I take must be with my ministerial duty. If Oahu should happen to become a battle field I visualized the terrifying chaos resulting among the citizens. As a civilian, my first thought was either to organize a rescue party somewhat like a Red Cross or to participate in one if such a group was being organized in our community. However, that opportunity never materialized.

PN: Were you shocked that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor?

SS: Yes, I was very shocked. I could not believe it.

PN: What happened after that, then?

SS: Upon the declaration of an emergency, we could not hold meetings nor could we hold a few group gatherings. We could not talk in Japanese on the telephone. So, all the functions of the Buddhist church stopped.

When I wanted to go to Waipahu or to Honolulu, I had to report to the F.B.I. Therefore, we Japanese did not go out. I stayed in the church.

One afternoon, two F.B.I. men came to see me. Without a single word to my wife, I was taken to Immigration (Office). On the way they told me, "After the hearing, you can come back home. So, don't worry about your family." But I did not come home until the War ended.

PN: But did you expect them to come and pick you up? The F.B.I?

SS: Oh, yes. I thought someday the F.B.I. would arrest me. I didn't know when they would arrest me. I didn't know when they would come to our home. You know, many Japanese who were Buddhist ministers, Japanese school teachers and agents of the Japanese Consul were already arrested by the F.B.I.

PN: What did your wife think and.....

SS: After I was arrested, my wife had many hardships and worried over many problems; how to manage the church, how to feed her little child and to live by herself. But she could not solve these problems for herself at the church. At last she made up her mind to go to her parents' home in Honolulu and to find herself a suitable job. Fortunately she was

an American citizen and could speak both Japanese and English. She got a job. Then, she came to Ewa from Honolulu to clean up the church once a week. During my absence she never wrote me about the church and her life. Maybe she did not want to make me worry. She only wrote me, "Don't worry about the church and family", that's all.

After two months, we internees were sent to the Mainland from Sand Island. First we arrived in San Francisco. Then, from there we were sent by train to San Houston, Texas. At this camp there were Germans, Italians and Japanese who were arrested from various (U.S.) states. After two weeks, we Japanese again were sent to the Roseburg Internment Camp, New Mexico. After one year, we were sent again to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Just before the War ended, my wife and the families of the internees were sent to the Crystal City Family Internment Camp in Texas by the Red Cross. Then I reunited with my family. After the War, December, 1945, we returned to Honolulu from Crystal City.

PN: Before you go into that, why did they transfer you all over the place?

SS: I didn't know why.

PN: They just moved you around?

SS: Yes. We didn't know why we had to move. But we had to follow the orders of the authority.

PN: How was life in Sand Island, like, compared to the Mainland?

SS: Food and treatment was better on the Mainland than on Sand Island because the island was near to the direct place hit by the Japanese.

PN: How many priests were interned during the War?

SS: I didn't exactly know but almost all priests were interned. A few priests were not arrested in Hawaii.

PN: There were some woman priests, too?

SS: It seemed to me that two or three woman priests were arrested in Hawaii. I didn't know how many woman priests there were because the men and women were in separate camps.

PN: And what about the Germans and Italians?

SS: We were with them a few weeks on Sand Island and Houston. Though we lived in the same camp, I did not know anything about them.

PN: You said you were working with Mr. Sam Nishimura, the tailor?

SS: Yes, I did. Mr. Sam Nishimura was a professional tailor. He taught me how to operate the sewing machine on Sand Island. At the camp, we were supplied with only hand needles and thread to patch the broken pants. Suffering through the inconvenience, we patched the pants. One day

the Army brought us a sewing machine. But nobody know how to operate the machine. Fortunately, Mr. Nishimura came into the camp as an internee. Then I learned from Mr. Nishimura how to operate the machine. Since then I sewed many clog-thongs and mended things for the internees. At the internment camps I held many kinds of jobs as a volunteer. For example, being a tailor, an orderly of the hospital, a doctor's assistant, a news translator and news announcer.

PN: You'd read the newspaper and announce it over the PA systems and radio?

SS: No. We did not have such a PA system and radio. After translating the English news from the papers and radio into Japanese, we announced the news in Japanese to all internees. All of the people enjoyed listening to the news at the mess hall after the supper.

PN: What camp was this in?

SS: Let me see. Santa Fe, New Mexico; Roseburg, New Mexico and Crystal City, Texas. Everywhere, all internees wanted to know the information about the movement of the world.

PN: You were picked because you know how to speak and write both Japanese and English?

SS: Yes. I think so.

PN: Did they pay you for this job?

SS: No, they didn't. You know, all of the jobs in the internment camp were volunteer work. So, my job was voluntary.

PN: While you were in these various internment camp, how many people from Hawaii were interned?

SS: I cannot say exactly how many people there were. But the first group of internees who were sent to the Mainland consisted of 172 persons. Then, second, third.....ten groups were sent to the internment camp. Approximately 700 people were sent.

PN: While you were helping the doctor, what kind of sickness or illness did people have? In the camp, you know, you said you helped the doctor?

SS: In the camp, people had ordinary sicknesses; headache, cold, stomach pain and so on. When people became seriously sick, they were sent to the Army General Hospital in town.

PN: Can I ask you one more question? What is your reaction to the United States government interning you in this concentration camp, or internment camp?

SS: At first I hated the U.S. government. Why did they arrest us, separated us from our families and send us to the internment camps? We helped the people in Hawaii, the community and indirectly the

government of the United States. We never had any hostile thoughts over the U.S. government. I thought something was not fair. Now my idea has changed to such that it seemed natural that we were to be arrested and sent to the Mainland, because there was a war between Japan and the United States. I have had thoughts of the U.S. government possibly meaning--well by protecting us from the dangers of the outside. In the present, I think that it was all a good memory and experience for me. I am thankful of the War treatment.

PN: You think it was a good experience?

SS: Yes, that was my good experience. Though it was a hard experience, I now can endure any hardships in this world. But I feel sorry for the old people who were interned during the four years. After being released from the internment camp, some of them passed away, and some could not work in their own business because of their agedness. In those days I was young, but now I am 65 years old. Mr. Sam Nishimura is 72 years old.

PN: They had hard time readjusting to the camp life?

SS: Yes, I think so. That is memories of 30 years ago. I can recall the good old days, still fresh in my memory.

END OF INTERVIEW

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