MK: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Sato at his store in Honolulu, O'ahu, Hawai'i, on August 18, 1992. The interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto.

Okay. For today's interview, I'm gonna take you back to 1935, when you graduated from McKinley.

RS: High school.

MK: And I'm curious about the course of study you had at McKinley.

RS: Well, being a merchant's son, naturally I attempted to take a little more of the commercial subjects, but generally speaking, it was a general studies so that at least it enabled you to get into the university level. And in order to do that, you have to have your studies, social studies and as well as your commercial, but also your math and other studies were necessary for, I think, admission to the university. So it wasn't really commercial in a sense, but I did tend to take a little more commercial than, say, a normal student would study there in high school. There wasn't any particular specialty at the high school level, but the important thing was to get into a university. So therefore it was, I would say, generally speaking, a general study of—for preparation of college, I guess, in those days.

MK: What were your aspirations at that point?

RS: My aspirations, other than going to the university, was none. I felt that I need a higher level of education. However, I think my trip to Japan in the summer of 1934, when I was a junior, influenced me a great deal. And then, of course, my background, generally speaking, because of my folks coming from Japan and not speaking any English was leaning toward being a better student in the language schools, Japanese language schools. So I attended language school from the time of kindergarten in Japanese school—and my father was active in the kindergarten PTA at that time. Matter of fact, he founded that PTA and the kindergarten system in the Japanese language school. And I attended the Japanese Central Institute, which was called Chūō Gakuin, on Nu‘uanu Street, since first, kindergarten, first grade, up to my high school year—twelve years. So actually you finish—in Japanese school, you finish, I think, in the tenth grade your regular so-called course. And then, the additional two years is
considered an additional *koto gakko*, in those days, or *koto ka*, which is the—our high school system, junior and senior year. So I attended the language school up to twelve years.

Now as far as being a student of the Japanese language school, I wasn’t particularly any better in the Japanese language school, but I guess the influence of my parents being Japanese and not speaking English at all was, made me, I guess, a little more leaned toward the Japanese language, you know, I mean, studies.

My idea of going to Japan was really sudden, because I—as I said—I visited Japan when I was a junior, and I enjoyed the visit, and I was very much influenced. The following year, after I finished my high school, while I had the admission card to the University of Hawai‘i, I thought maybe it would be a good idea that I—on my own initiative—go to Japan and study Japanese. Of course, I approached the subject to my parents, and my parents were very happy about it. So I said, well, I’ll think I’ll go and try and do my—I mean, Japanese study there and learn about Japan, learn about its heritage and culture a little more. And so, off I went to Japan in August, without knowing where I would be going. So when I landed there, why, there was a very—a man, Mr. Terada, who was—who used to be a book seller, or book dealer, in Hawai‘i, of Japanese language school—was there to greet me. And he took me in his—under his wing, and he introduced me to a teacher in Kichijōji—or Kishōji, we call it in those days—outside of Tokyo, but maybe thirty miles away, or twenty miles away, outside of Tokyo. It’s considered outskirts of Tokyo at that time, and he introduced me to a school teacher who taught at *Seikei Gakuin*. Well, prior to my going, there was a Mr. Yamamoto from Hawai‘i that stayed there, so he had experience handling Japanese-American or nisei students in his home, so he had three little, young children, but he had a spare room in his house, so I was offered to stay with them. So I stayed there.

Now, the problem of school was, of course, naturally, being Japanese-American, my spoken Japanese was not too well—well, my Japanese was not too well, basically, not on the level of the high school over there, so I told Mr. Terada maybe I should repeat my school and go back to high school level. But the only high school level is very difficult to get in anyway, so I thought, well, maybe he can introduce to some school where I can go as a special student for a while, and then become a regular student later. So he gave me an opportunity to study at a Japanese high school, Takanawa, Japanese level—I mean, when I say Japanese, I mean to say that this was a high school level school in Tokyo called Takanawa, which is located in the Takanawa area, which is near downtown Tokyo, near Shiba, and it was quite close to Keio University. And they allowed me to enter the high school course there, majoring, probably, specializing more in commercial course, because I tend to be more leaned toward that studies. So I spent the half of the sophomore year, then the whole—well, they have a five-year high school system, as you know. So spent the fourth year, the third year, half a semester, fourth year, one whole semester, and the fifth year, one full semester, before I was ready to get into university.

**MK:** Were your fellow students all Japanese?

**RS:** All Japanese. I’m the only Japanese-American in that (chuckles) . . .

**MK:** How did your fellow students react to you?
They reacted a little different in that I was a little older, naturally, repeating my studies. But they thought, well, I was a little different, but they accepted me. And I would try to follow their customs and their style of, you know what I mean. The Japanese students in high school level are very strict as to upper and lower classmen. You have to respect the upperclassmen, regardless of your size. And I understood that very well, and I did end up—I tried to be as much Japanese as possible while I was there. But in the meantime, naturally, going just to school wasn’t enough to prepare for college, so at night I had some special teachers from this school in Kishōji, called Seikei Gakuin, which was considered very highly, a high level school at that time. It had a grammar school up to the university level, and it was sponsored by, I think was Mitsubishi, but it was a private school, but highly thought of. So I studied under some of the teachers there, particularly for entrance examination to college level, you know. And naturally, the subjects were basically Japanese history, and Japanese classic, Chinese classic, and kōgo kanbun, and Japanese history. Japanese classic, Japanese language, and then Chinese language, Chinese classic. And these were the subjects that would be very difficult for me, so I emphasized that. And then, besides that, examination would require your English—English-Japanese, Japanese-English, another language, another foreign language, and your math subjects. And of course, they have an oral interview before they accept you in school. But I did that for three years, two and a half years, before I got into Keio. It was, well, I thought if I couldn’t get into a good school, I’d just as well leave Japan and go back to school, but I was lucky to get into Keio on my first try, my fifth year, after I’d been in high school.

So, let’s see now, ’35, ’36, ’37, and the—I entered Keio in ’38, March. And they had two types of course, one was a junior college course, and one was a six-year, regular college course. And my advisor advised me that I should—since I had intention of going back to Hawai‘i and going to the Mainland to study—he said, “Why don’t you take the three-year course, and then after the third year, if you decide to get into the fourth, fifth, and sixth, why, you take another exam and go in there?” So I said, “Okay, that may be the best idea.”

So while I was accepted on both courses, and very fortunately I was, I took the three-year course, to make sure that at least I have a cutoff date, you know, a cutoff time for that college. So I did get into Keio, the three-year course. And after the third year, well, I took the examination again for the fourth and I was accepted in the law school, so I remained in law school and that’s when the war started, and I came back. And, you know, I wanted to play some kind of sports while I was in school, but I never did because my studies were just too heavy. However, when I was in Keio, finally one day, one of my teachers, an English teacher from Canada, Mr. Fisher, said, “You know, I had a delegation call on me today from the American football team.”

I said, “Say, sensei, I don’t play football. I never—I played some barefoot, you know, I mean, sand lot football in Hawai‘i, I’m not even a football player, so—” but if any sports I wanted to play, was baseball, because I did play baseball in high school in my last senior year, then we—I thought I was a pretty good player. But even baseball, I didn’t go out for baseball because I know that Japan, you go in for baseball, they’re very serious about it. They put you in a dormitory.
So, they approached me one day and said, "You know, Sato, you're from Hawai'i and I understand you're a good ballplayer."

So I said, "Well, I thought I was a pretty good ballplayer, but I'm not interested in playing ball."

He said, "Why is that?"

I said, "Well, I don't like your dormitory system." I said, "You know, once you accept to play ball, you have to go in the dormitory, you know. You live there, with the boys, all your life, all your school days." But I said, "No, no. I don't like the system, so I rejected that." And they were kind of little mad at me, but I said—but football, it wasn't dormitory, it was something different.

But this Fisher pleaded with me and said, "You know, they need help very much, the Keio football." And I'll tell you why. Football was founded by Dr. Rush of Keio University from the _____________, you know, in 1933, they started to play football. And the first team that played was Rikkyo, Meiji, and Waseda, only three teams in 1933. Comes 1935, they ask Keio to join, see, and the rest join—Keio, Hōsei, and there was, I think, five teams at that time, but later on they had six, Nichidai came in. But when the Keio team joined the rest of the three teams to make up a better, you know, group of league teams, they had no Japanese-Americans on their team, Keio. The rest, the Meiji and the Waseda teams, were full of Japanese-Americans from either Hawai'i, Mainland, or Canada. So they were, kinda, you know, football players in a sense that they're natural, you know. They played football like we did, doing the sand lot. And so they won all the championship, every year, for something—like from 1933 up to 1940, there were none other than Waseda or Meiji won. No other team won—Hōsei, Rikkyo. The other team that had very few—like Rikkyo had two or three, Keio had none, and Hōsei had one or two, you know—Cy Gusu was playing, I remember. But Keio, this teacher was pleading with me, he said, "You know, Sato, you have to go out and help 'em."

I said, "I'm not a football player, sensei." But I said, "They don't have Japanese-American there, in the Keio team, come on." I said, "You know, sensei, I'm playing golf now," because I did learn, I had to do some sports, so I said, well, golf is at least I can go on the weekend and play golf myself, eh. I don't have to play with a team. So I played golf, see.

And then the teacher said, "You know, golf, Sato, golf is for the rich man, it's something that you do after school, after you graduate from school, not while you're in school, that's too much of an expense to play golf."

I realized that. I said, "Well, but I have to do some sports, so I'm playing golf. I'm not playing baseball, I'm not doing anything."

But he said, "I know that you can help the team, so you better go out."

I said, "Chee, sensei, I don't want to play golf."

"Well, I'll tell you, I'll make a deal with you." He said, "You know, you go out to play football with these guys, and then you can forget my classes," and there were two classes a
week. And I'm the only Japanese-American in his class anyway, and nobody speaks English. And he's teaching this English, conversational English literature, or something like that. Very, very simple kind of an English. He said, "You know, you can forget my classes. Don't worry, I'll take of your classes, your grades."

So, you know, he kind of forced me, you know, so I did go out. Well, I tell you, first day I went out, I just, you know, naturally, you know, Japanese style is you be understudy of somebody, you know, for a while, right. The following year, 1940, which was my last year in the third year subject—1938, '39, '40—well, our team was considered a favorite, one of the strong teams for championship, for the first time in the history of football. And I played very well, and well, I was chosen the most valuable player for that whole league, but we did finally beat Waseda and Meiji, first time, and won the championship. So in that respect, we have a good record of football there. So there's a book, you know, fifty years of football in—you know, it's already fifty years, you know. And then there's an article about myself playing football in 1940, but I wasn't a football player. Really, in a sense, I wasn't big or anything, but I passed well, I kicked well, and helped the team, you know, I helped the team. And then, there was another Japanese-American that later came on. He died in the war, though, but he was from California, Miyoshi. And he played—he was a pretty heavy guy—he played guard for us, but I understand he died during the war, and he was forced to join, I mean, I guess.

MK: Were there other Japanese-Americans attending Keio at the time you were there?

RS: There were—oh, you can count it on your whole hand. I only can—I only knew about one or two. There was a fellow named Shibayama, maybe one or two years ahead of me, that was in Keio. His father was—she came from Kalihi.

(Visitor arrives, taping is interrupted then resumes.)

RS: Well, we won the championship that year, in 1940, and then the 1941 year, I remained in school to—if I stayed there, I would have played ball, but something happened in 1941, January, after I was accepted in school for the fourth year. One day, a military gendarme, what they call kenpeitai, personnel, came to interview, or came to see me at my apartment, where I stayed in Shibuya. And he came into my room and sat down and it was sort of an interview for a job, and he wanted to hire me—in January 1941—hire me as a, what they call, gunzoku, means attached to the military, as an English expert, because I spoke English, naturally, being a nisei. And at that time, he said, "Our army is going to Malaya and going to Philippines, Indonesia, and so on, down the south, and we need people like you, has speaking English ability." So I guess he was going to interview a lot of nisei as much as possible, but he had the record there. He knew who I was and where I went.

But I said, "You know, I just started my third, three-year program with Keio, and I have to finish school, because, after all, I'm sent over here for schooling and I need a little time." But, you know that they were watching you constantly already by the interview, that they're watching out for people like us with special knowledge of English, to be recruited in the army or the navy, you know. So I said, "Gee, this is bad, really." I was thinking maybe that war was becoming intense. Japan was warring with China, and then, they had already spread their population, invaded Manchuria, and so on, so on. They were hyped up on—this military hyped up on this ko, prosperity spirit of Asia, you know, at that time. So you can see that they were
expanding their military might all throughout Asia. And I said, “Chee, you know, it’s not getting any better. Something is gonna happen.”

So I made up my mind to leave Japan, and I went to see my teacher, my advisor. And you know, I said, “I wanted to stay in Japan, but under these conditions, maybe I better go to a Mainland school.” I said, “You could recommend any school that I could go to?”

He says, “Well, your grades are good enough.” He says, “I think we can recommend you to Harvard, we have a sister relation, or Stanford, or Pennsylvania, which is the Wharton School there.” So he said, “Whichever.”

But I said, “Harvard is a graduate school, so I’m not even a graduate yet.” You know, I’m still undergrad. But in a way, Japanese thought is undergrad. “And Stanford is too much of a West Coast.” Well, I think Stanford is a good school, but it’s still a graduate school. Those days, graduate school was—see, Stanford was a graduate school. The only undergrad business school was Wharton School, and they didn’t have any graduate studies, so to speak, you know, they didn’t have an MBA in those days. They had graduate school, but not MBA. So I said, “You know, I think Wharton School would be the most ideal if I can get in.” So I said okay.

So I decided that I’ll leave Japan, and you know, they’re watching you constantly, so it’s very difficult to just get off Japan in those days if you’re—you’re a dual citizen, because you’re born of Japanese parentage. As long as you live in Japan, you’re a Japanese citizen, you know. So they’ll watch you closely, so I got together with my classmates. I said, “Look, I’m going home, pretending that I’m going to visit my mother who’s sick in Hawai’i. Now, that’s my story, you know,” I said. “Now, I’m gonna just pack a bag, just a small bag, the rest I’m gonna leave behind like I’ve never—I’m coming back again. That’s the only way, you know. As soon as I hit Hawai’i, land in Hawai’i and there for a few days, well you can go back to my apartment and take anything you want, take it out completely, because I won’t be coming back.” So was okay, fine.

So I go to the Yokohama—and it was in April, end of April, I think, that I was able to get a boat to Hawai’i. Either the Asama or Tatsuwamaru, but I don’t remember the boat, but looking back now, it’s probably one of the four, or fourth or third last boat out of Japan. But anyway, I got on the boat and as I got in the boat, they interview you, see. He says, “What’s your reason for going to Hawai’i?” and things like that.

I said, “Well, I have a sick mother in Hawai’i, I’m going to visit.”

I had my Japanese school uniform, looking like I was a Japanese student. And I said, “Look, I’m coming back after I visit my mother.”

He said, “Okay.”

So they gave me an okay immediately, without too much fuss. But in the meantime, I told my teacher, “You better send my credentials over to the school, you know, so I can at least get a start there.”

So, “Okay, okay, fine. Don’t worry, I take care.”
So I get back here, then I'm caught in the draft, already, in 1941. I arrive here May, I think the middle of May. As soon as I landed, they wanted me to register for draft. There was a draft, you know, I mean, a military service draft. So I signed up immediately and went to take my physical. And they classified me as 1A. One-A means you cannot move from Hawai'i, you know, I mean, if you're a male. You're going to the army, or you know, service. So this was 1941, June or July, June, I think, yeah. Then I said, "Chee, that means I cannot even get away to go to school, you know, if you're drafted." So I said, "Eh, is there any way I can get a re-examination of myself?"

So finally I got over to the examination, the armory here locally was located near the Washington Place there, in those days. Then there was a doctor there, Japanese doctor I remember, and he re-examined me and he gave me a—he says, well, he look, he said, "You know, your teeth are not too good."

I said, "Yeah, I know, I lost the teeth playing baseball so—"

He says, "On that basis, I think I can classify you 4A—4F.

Eh, I said, "That's beautiful."

So as soon as he reclassified me as 4F, I was able to leave Hawai'i. And I left on a boat, going over to California for a while, stayed there for a few days and then went on to Philadelphia on a train. But you know, it was a long, long trip, takes five days on the boat, and another four days on the train to get to Philadelphia those days—no plane.

MK: You know, what was your father's reaction to all this? You know, was worries of war coming, your leaving Japan, and your going off to the Mainland for college.

RS: Yeah, well, he was busy. That time, he was busy. I remember in 1941, he was president of the Japanese chamber, which is, you know, a big organization here. And then he was also president of the Japanese society, which is the Rengo Kyōkai. See, anybody who became president of chamber, those days, became also the president of Japanese society. It was not a separate group. The separate group came after the war. So he was, I would think, he was very, very busy. And then he was running this organization, but he wasn't too concerned about whether. . . He said, "Well, the atmosphere is very bad," so they were constantly having some social functions with the military people, you know, I remember. Taking them to tea houses, get to know them better. My father was doing that before the war. Got the admirals and generals together at a tea house, and they were trying to smooth over . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

MK: You were saying that even prior to the war, your dad was getting to know the military.

RS: Yeah.

MK: To what purpose was . . .

RS: No, that was to—well, he thought to get together with the military was—well, in a way, see,
remember that the military and the Caucasian people in Hawai‘i were very suspicious of a lot of activities among the Japanese. And, you know, that idea that the Japanese don’t assimilate too well to American, it was very prevalent those days. “Japanese are slow to assimilate into American way of things,” that was the theme. The Japanese Civic Association, composed of young people those days, met at the YWCA [Young Women’s Christian Association] many times and was promoting citizenship among Japanese, niseis especially, generation, because they thought that they were pressured by the Hawaiian community, especially Caucasians. The Japanese are very slow, need to be assimilated in the American way, better. And they were not doing a good American—you know, I mean, Americanism, were very poor. That was the prevalent rumors, in those days. And then, my father, who belongs to the Japanese, pure Japanese organization called Japanese chamber, thought it would be a good idea to occasionally have the military people together with them, and have some social functions, so they often had meetings or gatherings at these Japanese tea houses.

MK: And when you say military, this is the . . .

RS: Top commanding officers, and you know, the chief officers of the different groups, and they met in the tea houses, and you know, talked it over, you know, I mean, have an understanding a little better, that’s all.

MK: What would they talk about? Americanism, __________________ . .

RS: No, yeah, yeah. They’ll talk about . . .

MK: . . . or Japan ____________ .

RS: No, not so much that kind of high level talk, but mostly on a social basis, get to know each other better. But you know, the Japanese here are not out here to defend Japan or anything like that. They want to better Hawai‘i for their kids, and educate their kids. That was the idea, the whole theme. And—but it was misunderstood by the Caucasian group. The Japanese do not assimilate into the American ways easily. And then, was very harshly criticized because of that, I remember.

MK: And, like, when you say military, that would be the American military that got together.


MK: How about with—was your father socializing with Japanese consulate __________________ . .

RS: Oh yeah. Well, basically . . .

MK: . . . Japanese ____________ ?

RS: Basically, they were associating with the consulate here heavily, and that was the center of all activities were among the, you know, the consulate would take a lead in the Japanese. And Japanese language school was criticized, because too much language. You know, those days, there was a huge, I think, bold movement by the Caucasian to do away with the Japanese
language. And there was quite a bit of animosity among the Japanese---well, basically they thought the Japanese were too Japanese-y and they were not assimilating to American ways. And Japanese language school was one of 'em. And then the, you know, Japanese organizations, all kind, *kenjinkai*, and things, then another. And these *kenjinkai*, remember he's head of association of *kenjinkai*. Japanese Society is a federation of all of these *kenjinkais*, and he was head of it. So, you see, in order to ease the tension, he thought, well, together, and talk it over with these military people, make it easier. That was the purpose. It was not a high level talk in the sense that they were trying to defend Japan, because they were all Japanese citizen. They could not become American citizens in those days. They wanted their children to become American, really, in true sense, to remain loyal to America.

But in many ways, in order to become good citizens, the Japanese language schools in many ways is a good source of building character, you know. When you look back at it, they taught you ethics, they taught you Japanese tradition, they taught you the pride of being Japanese, and things like that are good citizen teachings. And this is why I think our kids are disciplined, in those days, because of that Japanese language school. So you cannot, I think, criticize Japanese language system, Japanese language school system, of being anti-American. Matter of fact, it made better citizens out of the Japanese. They may not be real good American, but they were good citizens. They stayed out of trouble, they respect their parents, they respect their elders, and their ways, Japanese style, was in a way, a good way to build good citizens. This was misunderstood by the Americans. They thought, wow, these Japanese guys are being all Japanese. You know, going to Japanese language school, they're going to be like Japan people. It wasn't so. They were born here, and as it turned out, you see the nisei battalions and soldiers were loyal to the Americans, once they went there. But they were taught these ethics when you were kids, you know, by their parents, by their language school, and by their elders.

MK: And your father was highly involved with the Japanese language . . .

RS: Language school.

MK: . . . and the chamber of commerce.

RS: Chamber of commerce, and then Japanese society. So you see, citizenship was basically, good citizenship basically built on that kind of basis, of Japanese heritage and cultural teachings and ethics, in school. And this is—I don't say this is why the Japanese are better, but I think learning your heritage and culture and Japanese makes for better citizenship, in the long run. That's what we need here, right. So you have a sense of, I think, belonging. Your esteem is at least built to a point where you're proud of being, you know, I mean, you're proud of your heritage. And these are part of being good citizen, I think. And I don't think you can fault the Japanese language system at all, but it was a big controversy at that time about Japanese language school. And Mr. Makino of *Hawai'i Hochi* took the lead saying that, no, he thought that, you know, the Japanese language school was doing a good job for the young people. And he was strongly anti-abolishing the Japanese language school, whereas the American papers, the so-called Hawaiian Star-Bulletin, Advertiser were anti-Japanese language school in 1940. And while today the Japanese language school is not flourishing at all, I think they still—there's teachings of the niseis instilled in them this, you know, spirit of the Japanese ethics, sense of ethics. Ingrown into this younger people today because of the teachings, and in
MK: So your dad was involved in that . . .

RS: Yeah.

MK: . . . and you went through that system.

RS: That's right. So we felt that, you know, there is a sense of pride and I think you have to, you know—they always say that if you do something wrong, it's a hajji, ________, you know, the shame of all your people, all your Japanese people, so don't do it. So you have to be careful as to what you do. So this is some of the teachings that we knew about. But not today, of course, naturally. But being a good American mean being good citizen, right? Obey the law, respect your, you know, authorities, stay out of trouble, you know, and do the best for your community.

MK: So in '41, when war broke out, your dad was president of the United Japanese Society?

RS: Yeah, well, he was interned immediately, the day the war broke out, on December 7.

MK: You were at home at that time?

RS: No, I was away to school. Remember, I went to Wharton School in '41, and the war started while I was there.

MK: So while you were away at Wharton . . .

RS: My father was interned.

MK: What did you hear about what had happened to your father . . .

RS: I heard that---well . . .

MK: . . . and your family and the store?

RS: Well, I heard that he was doing some yard---we lived on Pi‘ikoi and Elder, where the detention home used to be. Now, today, we had a house right in back of the detention home. And he was doing some hedge cutting, and in the morning of December 7, he didn’t know that there was a war. But immediately he was---some FBI people and people came to pick him up. I heard the story, now, and never gave him chance to even change his clothes, but went in with a gun pointed at him and they took him away to Sand Island, I guess, that’s the only thing I remember. And then they were sent to the Mainland immediately, after a few weeks here, to Camp McCory, Wisconsin. That’s the first place they were all sent, a group of 'em, you know. I don’t know how big a group it was. But I didn’t get to see him until he was shifted from ________, New Mexico and then, I think, the third place they stayed was in Tennessee somewhere, Nashville, or something. That’s when I got to see him, because he was in the East Coast, and I was—chee, where was I now? I was at Columbia, I think, graduate school, finished school. I was in Columbia business school, graduate school there. And then I
was able to visit him, and you know, it was a pretty sad situation. But then a year later, I was able to get him out—not year later, but some months—in my custody, in New York.

MK: How did you manage?

RS: Well, I wrote to some people, and the war was, I think, getting to be at the end. Now, let’s see now, I’m trying to figure out. In 1940—yeah the year that I got married—I, see I finished Columbia 1944, graduate school, and then I got my masters, and then I was working for the military government in Columbia. And I wrote to a few people and then, says, “What are the chances of him getting out to New York in my custody?” But, you know, when you say custody, he has to report to, you know, some parole people.

They said, yeah, the chances were good, so he did come out, just before I got married in July—in June, I think, of 1944—so he lived in New York for ’44, ’45, and ’46, and then went back to Hawai’i after the war ended. In the meantime, I was in Washington.

MK: And then, you know, when you—when did you first get word that your father had been taken away, put into custody on Sand Island, and then finally interned?

RS: Oh, my mother wrote me and I did get a letter from my mother saying what happened, and of course, she was let—she wasn’t pulled in at all, but she had to go run the store by herself, and some other help, and she was having hard time, but anyway, she wrote me saying what happened, so this is how I learned.

MK: And how did you react to it?

RS: Well, I wasn’t too happy about it, but you know, war time is war time, you know. When a war starts in—especially when you’re isolated like that. Now, if I was in West Coast, we’d probably be hauled in the camp, but being in Philadelphia, there were very few Japanese, and at that time, so the war came, and they were a few nisei that were there, but other than that, it was mostly Chinese. And so the reaction, well, was that war is war, and I guess he was active in the chamber, so he got hauled in. But not only him, but all kinds of people were hauled in. People that had connections with Japanese consulate people. People that had been past presidents of the organizations, presidents of kenjinkais, anything to do with the Japanese. Japanese language school teachers, all hauled in.

MK: When you initially heard about what happened to your dad, did you take any action?

RS: No, I didn’t take any action at all, because I assumed that war—it’s one of the things that, you know, create all these situations when they would try to. Because in the West Coast, they were trying to get all the Japanese together and then put them in camps. So Hawai’i, in a way, they were trying to move the Japanese population of Hawai’i somewhere to another island. I heard that. But I think some of the people here opposed that idea, and it was never. . . . But they at one time thought, sort of—I mean, at one time was going to and had planned to take these people away from O’ahu especially and then put them on another island. You heard that, didn’t you?

MK: And then, you know, you mentioned that, like your Mom was left behind and she was having
a hard time? How was the business ______________?

RS:  Well, you see, naturally the business of all Japanese nationals were seized by this enemy trading, something, you know, act, and the government had control. So they took over the business, and you had to disperse your income through them and report all your business activities to them. So naturally, she was---and then, being war, everything was rationed. And merchandise was not available, at all. So she had to rely on some of her friends to get some merchandise. Merchandise was very, very scarce those days. Clothing—anything shipped to Hawai‘i was on an emergency basis. And basic, only basic things were allowed to get in here—food and fuel and things like that. But clothing was considered a luxury so you can’t get any merchandise for your store, so she was, in a way, running a store without any much merchandise other than a ration. Everything was rationed, you know, even the clothing was rationed. So she wasn’t getting anywhere . . .

MK:  So she didn’t have merchandise.

RS:  No she didn’t have merchandise. So later on, when my father was released in New York, in 1944, and then, I was there, I would go to a wholesaler or something, in New York and get some, you know, a little merchandise. Small little package only allowed a certain size to be mailed there, but other than that, it’s not very much merchandise.

MK:  So how did she make a go of it while . . .

RS:  She did not really make a---just barely survived. That’s about it. She didn’t make a go of it at all, because there were no merchandise.

MK:  Were there any employees?

RS:  There were one or two, yeah, and then they stuck with us because they didn’t have no choice but to stay with us. Hawai‘i in that way was fortunate that you still could run a business, yeah, under enemy control or enemy trading act. Whereas in California, every one of them were just taken away from their homes and land and farms and business, and they were hauled into a camp. Hawai‘i did not face that. And then, of course, Hawai‘i was the exception, I think, fortunate in that respect.

MK:  You know, with your father being taken so suddenly, how well prepared was your mother to take over the business?

RS:  I really don’t know other than saying that I guess she was brought up in the business with him all those years, so I guess she was just determined to take over what she was doing. You know, she helped my father right along in business, you see. We lived upstairs in ‘A‘ala Rengo, remember that, so she knows what business is. So it wasn’t that difficult, like having somebody new coming in and trying to---no, no, no. My mother was in the business itself, so it wasn’t really that of a strange change, except that my father was not there any more. So she, you know, she took over in a sense that she tried her best. But it wasn’t doing too much because you can’t get merchandise, you know.
MK: Was there a market at that time?

RS: Oh, there was demand for a clothing—everything had to be sold under the counter, rationalized, rationed, because in Hawai'i there were no merchandise. And Hawai'i, especially, was isolated from the Mainland, right. And clothing was not considered an emergency, but food and things like that, yeah, maybe, but clothing no. So she was getting a few merchandise, now and then, and then when . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

MK: We were just talking about . . .

RS: Yeah, she got along, barely survived, so to speak. She could not get merchandise as she pleased, she had to go through the enemy trading company—enemy trading act. I don't know what, but there was an enemy trading act that governed how she can run the business during the war.

MK: How did the family fare?

RS: Gee, you know, here I was away alone, in the Mainland, I don't know. My family was still young yet, I guess. My brother, second brother, went to the army, and he was in some kind of a battalion in Schofield, so he was in the army. And my---the rest were still young, not—in grade school yet. So one sister was on the Mainland and she got caught in California. And she went to the camp, but released immediately I heard, and then she went to the East Coast to study. So she studied at Beaver College in Philadelphia, I was there. So she finished there and then went to some kind of a school in New York for a while, a fashion school or something.

MK: With your dad interned, the business not faring well, and war conditions, how were you able to support yourself through college?

RS: Yeah. So it was very difficult. There are certain---money was still there yet, you know, a few dollars. But in those days, money was not forthcoming like it used to be because the war came, as you just mentioned, but I took on some part-time work. I worked in the book store at Columbia. Working at the Presbyterian—I mean, Presbyterian Hospital in Columbia. And then, I did some spare work at the Columbia University Oriental Studies, under Mr. Tsunoda. I did some translation and did some teaching there. Then I taught at city college for a while, teaching Japanese there, (chuckles) for about a semester or so. So in that way I augmented my income.

And then, when I was in the graduate school, there was a military government school in Columbia, which consisted of graduates from the Colorado University, Japanese naval students, who were taught Japanese in the Colorado University system, very intense courses. And bright students all got there and then they were sent to this military government school. What it was, actually, was intelligence work, but more on the basis of, like, subject matter,
like economics and, you know, the general conditions in Japan, and so on, but it wasn't a military, pure military intelligence. It was a more civilian intelligence, where they prepared studies mainly if they had to land in Japan. But that was carried over, then I left there immediately after I finished school and went to Washington. And I worked there first with the Office of Strategic Services, which is OSS, which is intelligence. But they changed that into a state department, economic planning division of state department for Far East. I joined that group. And we had seven or eight niseis there working with different subjects. Dr. Yanaga, Yale University, he's from Hawai'i. Yanaga, Shitose Yanaga was a supervisor over there. But had Dr. Oshima, university, I think, he was an economist. And I was there. But anyway, it's four, five, or six of us were in an office at the Library of Congress during the war, and they were assigned different subjects, and mainly they gave you subjects so they can use that report or memorandum for study upon their landing in Japan.

MK: And what was your specific . . .

RS: My specific subject was mainly two. One was cost of living statistics of Tokyo, which I had to prepare from a lot of reference books, and predict and make an explanation—I mean, you know, try to see what the future would be of that situation. Also was a farm reform, they asked me to work on the farm, future farm reform of Japan. Japanese system at that time was basically owned by absentee ownership. And the tenant farmers lived in the farm and produced their produce, and got a share of the crop. And it was the government, the American government felt it was, this was not democratic enough. So he says, “Sato, you make a study and see whether you can divide this land into smaller lots.”

The largest lot was about 3.3 acre, I guess. But you see, basically there were absentee owners living in Tokyo, in big cities, and then it went back to—and then they got a share of their crop on a—oh, I don’t know what it was—fifty-fifty or sixty-thirty basis, and then the tenant got, you know, what they grew. So when the Americans landed, followed the report, we recommended that no more than 3.3 was to be given, as the largest lot, and then the rest about one acre, average one acre, on a farm, and then even small on some of the rice fields. And some of the orchard farm—not only rice, but orchards and mountains and things like that, where they grew food for the Japanese population. It took land away from the absentee owner, and then said, “Look, tenant farmers, you’re able to buy this land very cheaply. And then, since you’re the real farmer here, you farm the land.”

And this is what we recommended, that they sell it to these people cheap. But however, it didn’t work out that way. After several years, the tenant farmers were good farmers, but they were not good managers of land. So they were not able to manage the economics of the farming too well. And they weren’t very successful in that respect. So I think today, it reverted back to the old system, where they need to have a little more capital and money backer in order to run the farm. Some of them were successful, but many of them failed. So that system of democracy was not really good, in the case of Japan, because it was, maybe. . . So, you know, democratic system don’t necessarily work in any country, you have to be practical about it. But in the case of farm reform, it didn’t work too well. So that was one of the stories, but it was the Japanese system, I think, land system is a little different in many ways that you cannot apply American system. But that’s what happened in the case of Japan.

MK: So you worked for the OSS, worked on the land reform measure that the U.S. tried to
implement and occupy Japan, that didn’t quite pan out.

RS: Quite pan out too well. And, well, that was in 1945, right before the war ended. And when they dropped the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, in 1945, late, I think, it ended the war. And right after that, about a month or so later, in November or October of that year—they dropped the bomb in August, I think—I got a call from the army saying, “Mr. Sato, I think we’d like to have you go to Hiroshima for a bomb survey, economic.”

I said, “Bomb survey of Hiroshima?”

“You know, We want you to evaluate some of the effects of the bomb, from the economic standpoint. We need people like you to go.”

I said, “Wait a minute, wait a minute.”

It just so happened I was married then, and then my first daughter was going to be born, see. It was November already. Said, “You know, I have a daughter, first child in my family to be born, and I have to wait for the child to be born before I can even, you know, consider anything like that.”

“Oh, I understand. Don’t worry, don’t worry.”

So, okay fine. And I’m happy that I didn’t go there because years later, many years later, I did go to Hiroshima to look at the result of the bomb, and I went to the museum, and I thought it was such a gross sight. I don’t know whether you’ve been there, but I thought it was terrible. And I was—now, that you think back, if I went there, I might have gotten some radiation too, you know, I mean, problems, you know, In a way, I was happy I didn’t go. I was lucky. You know, I escaped a lot of things, you know, in many ways. But I said, “Oh, you know, I can’t go now, my daughter’s being born.” So that’s what happened. That was in 1945, yeah.

So I got away from that. And then, I said okay. But you know, government work was getting, after the war ended, I think Roosevelt, I think President Roosevelt died while I was in Washington. And then when the war ended, I stayed with the government, and they wanted me to remain in government, because, you know, they can continue their work. But I said, “No, no, no, no. I think I should leave the government,” because I didn’t like the government work too well. So I said, “Well, I think what I need to do is to go back to Hawai’i and help the family, because, you know, my father was released in nineteen—after the war, got back in 1946, early 1946. I said, “Well, I think . . .”

And then he found the store was in disarray and so had to start all over again, so he asked me whether I would want to come back and, you know, help him. So in 1946, right after—where was I now? I had left the government in April, I think, and in June of that year, I brought my family. And my daughter was born in 1945, December, so she was six months when we left.

MK: And I think earlier you had told me that your original plan was not to join the family business, ____________________.

RS: Yeah, yeah.
MK: What were your plans?

RS: My plans, you see, my plans was either going into the finance or business, or, you know, the banking business, because my major was finance banking in Columbia. That was my graduate work. And then I did write a paper on bank, my thesis was bank. So I said, "Well, I shall go into the banking business when I . . ."

But you know how it is, family business came along. My father asking me to join him and things like that. Being the eldest of the family, again that upbringing, the Japanese upbringing, forces you to become that way. You know, I mean in other words, this is why the Japanese, in a way, stuck together and have a sense of pride.

MK: Was it a hard decision for you to make?

RS: Hard decision for me, because, gee, I didn’t want to go into retails trade as such. But I was brought up in a retail store, so in that respect, it was not a hard transition, it was just a hard decision to make, to change—to not being able to do what you wanted to do. But business is business, right. So I did, I said, "Well, there’s nothing wrong with the clothing business." You know, you run a business and try to make a success of it. And then I have the background for it, because I was in the business myself, as a kid, and then I went to business school, so, you know, business is business.

MK: Now, how about your brothers? You were the eldest son.

RS: Yeah.

MK: How about your brothers, were they looked to for help at that time too?

RS: Yeah, yeah. They all came to the store to my brother, two brothers who came in. My sisters, of course, were away and not here, going to school. Harriet was, I think, in a Mainland school. The other sisters married on the Mainland, there was—no, no—the girls were not here, but the brothers all came to the business together, when I came in. So we all three went into the business together.

MK: So in ’46 . . .

RS: My second brother was, Barney was, yeah, came back home from the army, and then he joined me. And then Larry was still going to school then, I think, but he did go graduate school later on, to work in school too, part-time. He joined me later too.

MK: You know, I was wondering, you said Sato Clothiers was in disarray at that point, when you came back. What would you know about the condition of the other businesses at ‘A’ala Rengo?

RS: I think they all faced the same difficulties during the war, because most of the main, all were interned, I think, see. Mr. Awamura, Mr. Maeda, Mr. Kobayashi, Mr. Miyake—all the Japanese people were interned I think. Somewhere, in some form, but not in the same spot. And so they—the businesses were all run under enemy trading act, so I think they faced the
same kind of difficulty. I don't know exactly what happened during the war, because I wasn't there, but I imagine if it was something like us, I guess they had same problem.

MK: So, when you came back in '46, and you looked at the management, the other 'A'ala Rengo stores, were the children then coming back to these other stores too?

RS: Yeah. Well, there were few, I don't remember too well. But, yeah, many of them were still not there yet. But I guess eventually, they all came back and tried to help the store. And I remember, a few of them left right after they came back and then worked at the store for a while, and then they left to do something else, but I remained. Most of them, I think, left. The next door, Mr. Miyake with the Lion Shoe Store, matter of fact, took his family, and went back to Japan. So did Kobayashi. Kobayashi Store took his family and went back to Japan. And so Hawai'i Importing was still there, but you had Mr. Hino and all those outside people working. It was a Hilo, I think, managed store, so you know, it was a little different from a local store. Mr. Iwahara also went to Japan, and left it to his son and daughters. So you see---and Haseyama was—well, I don't know whether he was there now, yet. But anyway, some of those people left Hawai'i, you know, and they went back to Japan, because of the war. War ended, after the war ended. We were one of the only local ones that, I think, stuck there and stayed there. So Kawano is, of course, Hideo did something else, went into stockbroking, and the brother, I think, continued there. But, other than that, Awamura was, had no sons, all daughters, but he remained there with his wife and worked. He had no, no—he had some nephew, from the island, working for him, helped him. Whereas my family, I had myself and some, one or two workers there, you know, trying to rebuild the store.

MK: And when you say rebuild the store, what did you folks actually have to do?

RS: Well, you know, we had to get back some of our lines. For instance, the better lines. One particular line, the Arrow shirt company, we were loyal customers up to the war, and because of the war, they cut us off completely. And it was a major line, a well known line, see. That's one example, but most of the line was like that, but I just cite you one example. So when I came back, I says, "Eh, where's our Arrow shirt line."

He says, "No, we can't get 'em any more. They cut us off."

"Why," I said, "that's strange. Why? We were good customers, we paid on time, you know, we got letters to show you. Controller over there said—used to praise us—'Sato Clothiers, good credit. Pay on time,' you know, and things like that."

So I sat down, you know, I said, "Eh, I want to write to these head people there," especially the San Francisco. So I wrote 'em a stinking letter about, gee, why did you—how in the world can you discriminate against us because we're Japanese?

And especially it says, "Look, we're not in competition with a downtown store, like Liberty House. We're isolated in 'A'ala Rengo, 'A'ala, 'A'ala park area. And there's no reason why you shouldn't sell us, because we always did buy Arrow shirt for many years. It's a good line." So I wrote 'em a few letters telling them why in the heavens would you be discriminating against somebody, other than...
So finally got to the top, and then they finally said, "Look—" But things after the war were still on quota basis, you know, for a while. Not everything was all—I mean, was able to—you can't get goods easily. It was all on quota, because of war. So finally after a year or so after the war, the guy wrote me, the manager of San Francisco wrote me and says, "You know, I've read your letter, I sympathize with you. I want to meet you."

And so finally I took a plane over to San Francisco, went to meet this guy named Robinson. I said, "Eh, you know, this is a situation."

So they decided to give us a little shirts, some goods, shirts, underwear, you know, on a quota basis. It was all on quotas. So this is why they said they couldn't reopen our account because it was on quota. Everything was quota—white shirts and things like that. So they had to, you know, divide. But they allowed us a few shirts, underwear, that was a start, 1947.

MK: How about other lines?

RS: Same, similar in many ways. Most lines, a lot of major lines were taken away from us, like Jantzen line. And there were a few brands that I don't remember now, but we adopted some women's wear, like sweaters too see. But we got back to Jantzen, we got back to Arrow. So in that respect, I think, I was a little help in that respect when I came back. We got some of the lines back.

MK: Was it—would you say it was more discrimination, or more the quota situation.

RS: It was more discrimination, I think. You see, we were competitive with the downtown. Liberty House wanted an exclusive of Arrow shirts, Manhattan shirts for instance, and things like that. So when the agent would come to Hawai'i, just before the war broke out, they said, "You know, we buy enough from you guys, and I don't know why you're being ____________ to the Chinese store, Japanese store, you know, in outskirt areas."

So they convinced these people that they should be confined to, you know, one store. And then everything was, in those days, they want an exclusive handling of every line they carry, see. They don't want any other stores to compete with them. But we were in an area, way back in 'A'ala there, no competition. We had our own clients. And that argument didn't stand too well, but so you have to say that it was discrimination, that they didn't want to give the smaller and the Oriental stores any kind of a chance of selling their line, which is a popular line, you know, hard to get. The line that if you get, well, people will say, "Well, that store has Arrow shirts," so they all went to Sato in that area. But if you didn't have anything, they would—you know, we couldn't sell anything. But it was, in a way, discriminating against the small and some Oriental stores.

MK: So for you to get back that Arrow line, you had to write letters?

RS: Yeah.

MK: You had to see the person directly.

RS: Yeah, yeah.
MK: How about to get back other lines? What did it take to rebuild, to get the lines back?

RS: Well, then you were---once you get the major line like Arrow back, Jantzen back, you go to the other lines. Say, "Look, we got these lines now, back again." And that influenced the other lines too. You know, I said, "Oh yeah, you know, Sato got Arrow shirt back again. Jantzen back again."

So the other lines would follow, as long as your credit is good, you know. You have to show credit worthwhile-ness of your business before they could give it, because our business is run on an open account basis. You can buy it on a---if you have to pay cash for everything you buy, it's very difficult. Or if you paid for goods that arrived, it's very difficult. So it was an open account, thirty days, sixty days, or ninety days. And that's what you strive for. But in order to arrive to that point, you have to show that you have—your credit worth is substantial and stable. So the other lines just followed as soon as you got the other major lines in, you know.

MK: How long did it take for you to rebuild?

RS: Well, it took about three, four years, no, about 1946. So I was active in 'A'ala Rengo in that time, trying to promote that area. It's a little small store, twenty by fifty, but it was very busy store during the, you know, for the size of the store, because of the good lines we had. It took a good three, four years, but then the area was changing. Everybody was coming back from the war. Young people decided not to, you know, they were not going to live around that area. Automobile was growing in use. Parking was in demand. Gradually things changed over there.

MK: But prior to it declining that way...

RS: Yeah it was...

MK: ...how did you folks try to promote the area?

RS: Well, we promoted the area by trying to, you know, confine the area within the Japanese community. It was mainly Japanese newspaper, radio, and ________, see. And we promoted madly to these medias, you know. Because these were the medias that the Japanese community, was leaning toward the Japanese Times, Nippon Jiji, they called it, Hawai'i Herald. And then, they had couple of, I think, radio stations, that was just started then. But mainly newspapers were the source of, you know, Japanese community. But we mainly were a Japanese community store. We are not trying to get other races, you know, but there were, of course, a mixture of other groups in that area—the Filipinos and the Portuguese—that work in the cannery here—Hawaiians working. But our main thrust was Japanese community, so we used the newspaper media quite a bit, promoting that area. And then during the Christmas, we would think of some kind of ways of lighting up the marquee of the store, lighting up the trees of the store. And then also promoting extra parking lots, parking spaces for stores, because the market area, Otani, in the back, was getting very busy.

END OF INTERVIEW