

Interviewee: Fred Sasaki
Interviewer: Terry Yamada
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THE JAPANESE CANADIAN LEGACY PROJECT

[Start part 1]

Terry Yamada: Hi.

Fred Sasaki: Hi.

TY: Can you tell me your name?

FS: Fred Sasaki. Do you want my other name, too? Frederick Yoshihide Sasaki. And I'm known as Fred.

TY: And were you born here in Canada?

FS: No, I was born in Hiroshima, Japan.

TY: When did you come to Canada?

FS: My mother brought me when I was 9 months old.

TY: What was your mother's name?

FS: Midori, that was her maiden name.

TY: Was she also from Hiroshima?

FS: Yes.

TY: And can you tell me what your father's name was?

FS: [Unintelligible]

TY: Why did they come from Japan?

FS: Well, my father always told me that he came here when he was sixteen, in 1907, and ultimately his goal was to promote trade between Canada and Japan. That was [his] dream. That's why he came to Canada.

TY: So, did he go back to Japan after he came, and then came back again?

FS: No, he went back to get married, and my mother brought me when I was - in 1919. My father went back, got married, and when he was back I was conceived, but my mother's mother wouldn't let her come until I was born in Japan.

UM₁: When's your birth year?

FS: July 28th, 1918.

TY: Do you have any siblings?

FS: Yes, I have 6 sisters, but one died two years ago. All younger than me. I'm the oldest.

TY: Where have you lived, starting from when you came to Canada?

FS: In Vancouver, and then I went to Calgary, and then came to Toronto.

¹ Unidentified man.

TY: And were you interned during-

FS: No, what happened was that, I was in my final year at UBC, University of British Columbia, in 1942, and Pearl Harbour came on December 7th, 1941, and the night of Pearl Harbour, the RCMP came around seven o'clock that night and right through our whole house, took all of my father's documents, insurance papers, passport, everything, and they took him away. He was interned that night.

TY: Where was he interned?

FS: Well, first he was in [unintelligible] for about a month, and we were finally told that there were about forty of them that were interned that night, forty of them in the immigration building, in the wharf of Vancouver harbour. And then from there, they were stationed in Seebe, Alberta, where there were German prisoners of war. And he was there for a few months, and then they took him to Petawawa in Ontario and then to Angler.

TY: The night that he was taken away, what do you remember about that night?

FS: Oh, I answered the door, and I just remember three tall, very tall RCMP² people, in plain clothes. They showed me their badge[s] and they wanted to know if my father was home, I said yes, and then they went through our whole house. That's what I remember.

TY: How long were they there for?

FS: They were there a few hours.

TY: And what was the reaction of your family?

FS: Oh, we were just bewildered, just scared. Didn't know what was happening, why they would take our father away.

TY: Did your family end up following your father to Petawawa, or- did you stay in BC?

FS: Oh, no, the RCMP took him away, and they interned him, so the family, we were in Vancouver.

TY: So you were in Vancouver the entire time?

FS: Well, what happened to me was that in January, all enemy aliens had to get out of Vancouver, and since I was here since I was nine months old, I was classed as an enemy alien, so I had to get out of Vancouver, so I had to leave UBC. But fortunately for me, my sister was married to a family that had a residence in Calgary, so I went to Calgary, and, there, I arranged with my professors to have my courses sent my correspondence. And I studied in the local library, and I took my exams in April, and managed to get through.

TY: What were you studying?

FS: Commerce and finance.

TY: Okay, so, your family moved to Calgary-

² Royal Canadian Mounted Police

FS: Just myself. Because I was the only one that, my mother and my 6 sisters, what really worried me was that my mother and 6 sisters were left in Vancouver, my father was stationed to a Prisoner of War camp, and I was told to get out of Vancouver, so, my mother was left by herself with my 6 younger sisters in Vancouver, and they didn't know what to do.

TY: Did they move to Hastings Park?

FS: No, what happened was in - they were told to leave right away, in April 1942, to leave for Kaslo, B.C., the location camp in Kaslo so they were given only a few days, so they left everything, just a few belongings, so we lost all our photographs, lost all our family things.

TY: So you finished university in Calgary, in April?

FS: Yeah.

TY: So, what did you do after that?

FS: I worked in Calgary until the following April, 1943, and I wrote to the B.C. Security Commission to ask permission if I could go to Toronto.

TY: So, you and your other family members were separated?

FS: Yes, separated. My mother and the sisters were in Kaslo, my father was in an internment camp, until about April, May 1943, but he was the first one to be released, because he used to work for Nelson Spencer, a lumber, logging export company, they exported all over the world. And he was the Far East sales manager, so he knew the President of the Company. He happened to be the Colonel in the army, Colonel Nelson Spencer, from the First World War, so, with this info, my father was released, on the understanding that he would go to a logging camp way up in northern Ontario [chuckles], as a kitchen helper. And my father had never done work like that before.

TY: So, you stayed in Calgary until 1943, and then-

FS: Until I got permission from the B.C. Security Commission to come to Toronto.

TY: So, what did you do in Toronto?

FS: Well, my goal in coming to Toronto was that I wanted to get my family together, because we were all separated, my father in Ontario, my mother and sisters in Kaslo, so my goal was to get them together, and they told me the best way to get together was to come east, and then perhaps work for a farmer on the Niagara peninsula. And get work there, then we could all be together, and perhaps the farmer would, you know, provide us with accommodations. So, when I came to Toronto, there used to be the B.C. security Commission had a man here, Mr. Truman, that looked after the people coming here, to look for jobs for them, so he sent me to this farmer in Niagara, near St. Catherine's, and he start[ed] to talk to me, you know, and he asked me about my family, and I told him I had six younger sisters, and he shook his head [chuckles], "they're not useful to me" on the farm, and so he turned me down.

TY: Eventually, how did you get your family?

FS: So, I came back to Toronto, and I applied for different jobs, but in those days, you know, no nisei could get a white collar job.

TY: What did you get, then?

FS: Before I went to university in Vancouver, I worked at the Royal Bank for 3 years. So I thought I'd apply to the Royal Bank, I remember it so clearly because I worked at the Royal Bank as a junior, but, I remember it very clearly, through my connections, I had good recommendations from the bank, so I went to the head office in the Royal Bank to the personnel manager, and showed him my letters of recommendation, and he looked at me and said, "You're a Jap, get out of the office," and he kicked me right out.

TY: So you kept hunting for a job?

FS: Yeah. But what struck me most was that, when I eventually became Vice President of Finance of Canadian Tire, the President of the Bank would invite us, me and the President, for lunch in the dining room, because they wanted our business. And at that time, I felt like telling them about my experience, but I didn't [chuckles].

TY: Why didn't you?

FS: I don't know, I guess I was a little nervous, you know.

[Recording skips]

TY: What a fascinating life. What's your name?

FS: Fred Yoshi Hidei Sasaki.

TY: And where were you born?

FS: In Hiroshima, Japan.

TY: And when did you come to Canada?

FS: In 1919, when I was 9 months old.

TY: And you mentioned before, you came with your mother?

FS: Yes, my father came in 1907, and he went back to get married, and while he was in Japan, I was conceived, and he came back to Vancouver, but my mother stayed, and I was born in Japan. Because her mother insisted that she have the baby in Japan [chuckles].

TY: Was there a reason behind this?

FS: I don't know. I guess she just wanted to be sure her daughter had her baby as safely as possible.

TY: That's a very good reason. Do you have any other siblings?

FS: Oh, yes, I have 6 sisters, all younger than me.

TY: And were they born in Canada, then?

FS: Yeah, they're all born in Canada.

TY: Which area? Where were they born?

FS: They were all born in Vancouver.

TY: And that's where you lived when you were younger?

FS: That's right.

TY: How long did you live there?

FS: Oh, until December 7th, 1941- until, January '42.

TY: Did you attend any school there?

FS: In Vancouver? Oh yes, I went to Strathcona Public School, which was right in the middle of Vancouver, and it was a very, I guess what you'd call today, a multicultural school, all nationalities there, I remember there were coloured people, Chinese, Jewish, myself, lots of Japanese, you know. So it was a really multicultural school in Vancouver. I went there until I was in grade five. What happened was that, I had a brother, but he died [at] aged three. He died when he was three years old, and it broke my mother's heart, and she didn't want to live in that house anymore. So we moved towards Hastings Park, so, at grade five I moved to Hastings Park, it was a totally different school from Strathcona. It was predominantly Anglo-Saxon school now, so it was quite a different environment, so we moved there.

TY: Did you find with the school being multicultural that everyone interacted together, or was it fairly- everyone hung out with their own-

FS: Oh, yes, I just remember that my best friend was a Jewish boy. I remember that, and we got along very well.

TY: And did you find that changed when you went to a school that was predominantly-

FS: Oh, yes. It changed a lot. What I remember most of all is that on Valentine's Day, they used to give each other cards, and of course I'd be left out [chuckles] because I had nobody to give a card to, you know in those days, I was a Japanese and everyone were Anglo-Saxon so, I knew my place.

TY: And were there any other Japanese families?

FS: Just one more, she was a girl. And what was very embarrassing for her was, in P.E. class, we used to have to have partners to do different folk dances and that, and the P.E. teacher always partnered me with her [chuckles]. I know she was embarrassed, and I was embarrassed, but we laughed about it, years later, we met in Toronto.

TY: Well, that's nice. And did you go to high school in the same area?

FS: Yeah, I went to a junior high school in the east end.

TY: And was your high school the same ratio?

FS: In high school, there were quite a few of the Japanese students came, not a lot, but, enough to you know, that I could socialize with. It was Britannia High School. And so, in my class, I guess there were about - I remembered there was a girl, about two others Japanese, but there were different Japanese sprinkled all over.

TY: And what type of social activities do you remember?

FS: All I did outside of school was sports [chuckles], any sports.

TY: Was there anything that really interested you?

FS: At lunch hour, we used to all get together and play hand ball, and then I played for the school soccer team, and I played some basketball, you know with the kids and that, all sports, outside of school.

TY: So, just moving towards your home life, did you speak mostly Japanese at home?

FS: Yes, to my mother and father, I spoke Japanese. But to my sisters, I spoke English. Amongst the siblings, we spoke English. When I lived in Vancouver, it was all Japanese, I spoke Japanese to my friends, all of my friends in that neighbourhood, they were all Japanese children in Cordova street. When I look back, it was the ghetto in the Vancouver [area] but a lot of Japanese families lived there, and we spoke to each other in Japanese.

TY: Did you find there was a lot more Japanese culture, since there were a lot of families, did you practice more Japanese traditions or-

FS: Oh yes, boys' festival, girls' festival, things like that, yes.

TY: And, as you grew older, you went to university, how did you make the decision from being in high school to going to university?

FS: Well, what happened was that, [it] was very unusual. My father used to make all the decisions, like in most Japanese families, and I was in my final year of high school in B.C., it was grade twelve junior matriculation, not like senior year. I was in my junior final year, and one day my teacher came to say "The principal wants to see you, Principal Monroe wants to see you," you know, I thought, Oh boy, I was scared [chuckles], because, you know, you get called to the principal's office, it's something bad, and when I went there, my father was there. And Principal Monroe said to me, "I'm sorry to tell you, but your father wants to take you out of school, he wants you to work at the Royal Bank." In those days, there were two banks in Japanese sections, and Mr. Kinoshita was the manager of the Japanese section of the Royal Bank in the east end, and he needed an assistant, but all I could do was look after Japanese customers, I couldn't do any other occidental customers at all, just Japanese customers. And then back in those days, we closed at 3:00, of course we started earlier than that. Once they closed at three, the manager said, "I want you to help in different areas where they need help," so, I was quite happy, because I really learned the banking business that way, I'd shuffle from here to there, and I learned quite a bit, and I was at the bank for three years. And I realized that there was no future there, because all I could do was serve Japanese customers, and all I was doing was savings accounts and a lot of people transferred money to Japan. I guess they eventually wanted to go back to Japan. They were sending money back to Japan and I was doing Japanese transfers and I thought, "This is no future for me," at night I took the Manager's Recommendation, the Banking Course, with Queen's University, I got my degree with the ACB, the Association of Canadian Bankers, and all that, but I

thought to myself, "There's no future here," so, I talked to my father and I decided to go back to university.

TY: And how did it make you feel that you couldn't deal with the Anglo-Saxon customers?

FS: In Vancouver, in those days, there was so much discrimination against the Japanese, there was so much discrimination. [unintelligible] - this is it. All on the papers, everywhere was the "yellow peril". I don't know if you heard about them, Alfred Wilson, Green and all those people, those politicians. We didn't have a franchise; the Japanese didn't have a franchise so they [unintelligible]. Tremendous discrimination. I'll give you an example, in university, Ken [full name redacted], he took mining engineering, it was a 5 year course, got to his final year, to get his degree during that final summer, he had to work in the mine, go underground, and they didn't let Japanese go underground, so he didn't get his degree. It was a shame. So, he went back to Japan.

TY: In what other ways in everyday life did you see discrimination against the Japanese?

FS: Well, what you saw in the papers and everything, you knew you couldn't be a lawyer, you couldn't be any - all you could become as a professional was a dentist or a doctor. And even then you served the Japanese, you know when you graduated but that's all. Nothing. The people in the Japanese community said "You're crazy, going to university, all the graduates work in logging camps, sawmills, there's no future for you so why go."

TY: And why did you, if that was the climate of the time?

FS: Why did I go? Because my father was in business, so I thought I'd go into business with him, the logging and lumber business.

TY: And what did you take at university?

FS: Commerce and finance.

TY: Why?

FS: Because that was the only course that I could take that would serve me when I graduated. My real ambition was to- in those days, unemployment, we went through the Depression, the depression through the '30s, My ambition was to allay unemployment among the people and my dream was that eventually I could - when I was small, that I could become an economist, work with the Bank of Canada, then I have some influence on the unemployment. That was my dream, but I had to give that up, because- I'm kind of jumping, but when I came to Toronto, before I could find any job, after I'd saved a little bit, I applied to the Graduate School at the University of Toronto, the Department of Economics with that goal in mind, to one day work with the Bank of Canada, but since I was enemy alien - [next line is unintelligible] finally got to the board of the University of Toronto, I got a letter from

the President. They couldn't take me in because of my "enemy alien" status. So I gave that up.

TY: Going back to B.C., did you like UBC?

FS: Yes, because I studied hard, and I played soccer [chuckles]. I was captain of the university soccer team.

TY: Did you feel discrimination at UBC?

FS: No, no discrimination from the professors or the fellow students. I played soccer with them. No discrimination among the students or the faculty. It was Professor Angus at UBC, in the Department of Economics, who really spoke out publicly for the Japanese Canadians, that they shouldn't be discriminated against. And he was a professor at the University, I remember him.

TY: Did you ever meet him?

FS: Oh, yes.

TY: And have discussions with him?

FS: Oh, yeah. He was very, very good. He sympathized with us. But he was the only one that spoke up. Among the few.

TY: Can you tell me what your social life was like around those university years?

FS: The only social life, we had a Japanese student's club, it was about twenty five students, we used to have dances there, and believe it or not, I didn't know how to dance, so I remember [chuckles] my sister, we used to practice it in the house [chuckles], we used to have annual dances and I remember dancing with my sister to learn how to dance before I went to the dance. But all I remember was sitting down and just [chuckles] didn't have the courage to ask anybody.

TY: Did you finish your degree?

FS: Yes, well, as I mentioned, December 7th, 1941, Pearl Harbour, January 1942, all the enemy aliens had to get out of Vancouver area in a 100-mile radius, so, I was told by the university I was no longer welcomed, I had to leave, so, fortunately I had in-laws in Calgary, so I went to Calgary, and before I left, I arranged with the professors to send me courses by correspondence, and I studied at the local Calgary library, and I wrote my exams in Calgary- I was the only one in the room [chuckles], with one person watching me. So, that's how I got my degree, and I passed with first-class honours.

TY: Were there others in your class, who were notified of the same thing?

FS: Yeah, there were three of us, 3 nisei students, in the final year.

TY: And, during this time, what was the rest of your family doing?

FS: The rest of the family, they were notified in April 19 - I just couldn't describe the feelings of my mother and my sisters, because my father was in prisoner of war camp, I was in Calgary, the 2 oldest men, and they were left by themselves, to fend for themselves. So, I was worried, my father was worried; we didn't know where they were, and we were really upset, you can just imagine, the war you know. So,

luckily the, uh Tom [full name redacted], I don't know if you've heard of him or not but he was at "The New Canadian" [unintelligible]. I heard this from my sister, that he [said], "If you leave in a few days, you can go to Kaslo, B.C., to the relocation camp in Kaslo," and he would advised them to go there, and so my sisters and my mother, they were all sent to Kaslo, but they couldn't take anything, just a few clothes and that's all, because they had to leave in such a hurry. So, we lost everything, photographs, you know family photographs, things like that.

TY: Now, in 1943, you decided to move to Toronto.

FS: Yeah, in April 1943, I wrote to the Mrs. C. V. Booth, B.C. Security Commission, to ask permission if I could, relocate to Toronto, relocate east, because, I was very anxious at the earliest possible moment to get my family together, my sisters and my mother and my father. My father was released after about a little over a year and a half, from prisoner of war camp, Angler, he was the first internees to be released, because, fortunately, he worked for Nelson Spencer Limited before he went into business for himself and through his influence, he was a Colonel in the First World War, he said "You can go if you go to a lumber camp in northern Ontario, because it's short of labour because of war," so he wanted to get out, so he went to Northern Ontario, to a lumber company near Port Arthur. And my father was there, so I wrote to the Security Commission that I would like to come east, because I knew that the only - If I went east, I had a chance of getting the family together again. So, I applied to the B.C. Security Commission, and through correspondence, eventually she gave me permission to come. But, in the meantime, my father got sick in the logging camp, so they gave him permission to go to Kaslo, so in May, he went back to Kaslo, and in April, I came to Toronto.

TY: What happened when you tried to get a job?

FS: In Kaslo, my mother - my older sister got married, but she remained in Vancouver, after they left, but my mother and 5 sisters, and another family, because they were good friends, with their three children, lived in one room. I was shocked when I went, I visited them for one week once and the bunk beds, all those people just living in one room.

TY: What was your first job to Toronto?

FS: When I first came to Toronto? I told you, I went to work for a farmer, they sent me to a farm in the Niagara peninsula, near St. Catherine's, I didn't get that, I came back, and I remember, as I told you, I looked for some white-collar jobs [unintelligible], I thought may as well to get a C.A. degree, no way, I went to Lower Bank, no way, so the Mr. Truman, the B.C. Security Commission sent me to the Toronto [unintelligible], I remember that very carefully because he said "Be there at 7 o'clock," so I went there at 7:00, and I stood there and I stood there, and nobody came. An hour later, a man came, and he says, "I'm the owner here. Sorry I can't hire you. If I hire you, a Jap -."

[End of part 1]