

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Japanese American Project

Department of Justice Internment Camps--Internee Experience

O.H. 1614

MITUSHIKO H. SHIMIZU

Interviewed

by

Mariko Yamashita and Paul F. Clark

on

October 30, 1978

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## Interview Introduction

As an Issei entrepreneur and community leader, Mitushiko H. Shimizu contributed to the prewar development of Los Angeles' Little Tokyo district. Accordingly, he came under the scrutiny of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the years prior to Pearl Harbor when the Bureau was composing its lists of suspect Japanese. On the night of December 7, 1941, Shimizu was arrested. In this interview, he recalls how he and his fellows were treated shortly after their apprehension, a situation which later formed the basis of a formal Japanese protest. Although Shimizu places this and other incidents in his internment camp odyssey within the context of American wartime fears, he nonetheless calmly retells the many hardships faced by the Japanese American community, especially the Issei, before, during, and after the war.

Shimizu was born in Wakayama Prefecture near the city of Osaka, Japan. After a twenty-one day voyage in 1907, he entered the United States at the port of Seattle when he was about eighteen years old. In 1910 he started a dry goods business in central Los Angeles, an enterprise he has maintained down to the present day. He was active in the local prewar Japanese Association, serving as its president in 1937. In the postwar years, Shimizu actively helped in the return of the Japanese Americans to Los Angeles' Little Tokyo, and assisted the Japanese American Citizens League. Recently, he has opened a shoe store in Tokyo, Japan.

This interview with Shimizu was conducted in Japanese by Mariko Yamashita, a Japanese student studying at California State University, Fullerton. Miss Yamashita was under the supervision of the author, who was also present during the interview. Yamashita, thereafter, transcribed and translated this interview, and it is her translation that is herein presented. The interview was reviewed at Shimizu's request by his daughter, Fumiko Hirata, in March 1979, and she made only minor changes and additions.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

JAPANESE AMERICAN PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: MITUSHIKO H. SHIMIZU  
INTERVIEWER: Mariko Yamashita and Paul F. Clark  
SUBJECT: Department of Justice Internment Camps--Internee Experience  
DATE: October 30, 1978  
TRANSLATOR: Mariko Yamashita

C: This is an interview with Mitushiko H. Shimizu for the Japanese American Project of the California State University, Fullerton, Oral History Program. The date today is October 30, 1978, and we are at Mr. Shimizu's place of business, the Asahi Shoe Store, 321 East First Street, Los Angeles, California. The interviewers are Mariko Yamashita and Paul F. Clark.

Y: Let's start the interview, Mr. Shimizu, by asking your name, age, and a little bit about your background.

S: My name is Mitushiko Shimizu. I was born on February 20, 1889. I came to this country in 1907 and started my business in 1910. I have engaged in this shoe store business for sixty-eight years.

Let me tell you about [my experiences during] the war between Japan and the United States. On the night of the day when the war started, FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] men came to my house in Los Angeles and told me they had something to ask me, and ordered me to go with them to the police station. I said, "If you want to question me, do it right now." But they insisted that I should come with them. So, I told my wife that I would not be able to come back that night. Then I went to the police station. I found out they would not ask me anything, but put me into a jail. I was taken to the police station and then transferred to the Los Angeles City Jail. All the Japanese leaders were taken there.

Y: Mr. [Katsuma] Mukaeda too?

S: Yes. I was a chairman of the Japanese Association at that time, and all the

Japanese leaders of the Association had gathered before the war and made up the Emergency Service Committee. The movement against the Japanese was strong at that time. So we, the committee, dealt with the hard situation and the relations between the United States and Japan. At movie theaters, they said that buying Japanese commodities was helping Japan to provide more ammunition. They put the words on the hanging curtain in the theaters and showed them to the audiences.

Y: You mean they put them on the curtain in front of the screen?

S: Yes. The committee people tried to do something about it. When the Japanese walked on the streets, many young people spoke ill of us. The Japanese people had been excluded since 1907 simply because we were Japanese and the wrong race. They said, "You are Japanese. We don't like Japs." The Emergency Service Committee was a project of the Japanese Association. The committee was created at the time of my presidency in 1937.

We stayed in the jail overnight, and when the morning came, we found out that they would not give us breakfast. So we said, "Why don't you people give us breakfast?" We said that vociferously. But they just said, "Pretty soon, pretty soon." That's all. The next evening we were transferred to the jail on Terminal Island. They gave us some food there twenty-four hours after we were confined.

Y: Then you didn't eat or drink anything for the first twenty-four hours?

S: We could have water from a faucet.

Y: But you didn't have even tea?

S: No, not tea. For one thing, the American authorities were frightened. They were afraid that Japan might attack the West Coast someday. So they blacked out San Pedro. I understand that they had to do that for protection, but it was inhumane not to give us food. We stayed there until just before Christmas, and then we were transferred to Bismarck, North Dakota.

Y: Can you remember the date?

S: I think it was on December 20, 1942. We were taken there by train, in a freight car. The camp had already been built there. They [the barracks] looked like cottages. It was already in the middle of the cold winter. I felt very cold because I went there from a warm place. We walked in the snow when we went to the mess hall from the barracks. We had to cook for ourselves; they just gave us the food to cook.

We made up groups, and one group consisted of two to three hundred people. We elected a great leader, who always kept in touch with the administration. They [the internees] chose persons to cook or to do other work. Everyone of us was forced to take a part in washing dishes, and we did

it in turns. When it came to forced labor [like menial tasks], the Japanese people hated to do that--especially people who had a college education or who had held a position like a branch president of a company. They were the sort of people who hadn't ever done such a thing and they hated it. Some of them made excuses saying they had flu or a stomach ache. The value of a human being shows under such circumstances [as being detained].

The people I was most surprised about were the Japanese businessmen. Most of them had gone through [military] training when they were in high school in Japan; they had experienced something like a camp training. That experience helped. They worked very hard when it came their turn to wash dishes or to do what they were told to do. The most useless people were the ministers. Those people had never thought they would take on work like washing dishes before. They wouldn't do that. I was a leader later at the Louisiana camp, and the thing that troubled me most was about those people. Ministers who were supposed to serve people and take care of others shrank from their duty.

I was questioned by three people [in a hearing] because I had been a chairman of the Emergency Service Committee.

Y: At the North Dakota camp?

S: Yes. Three people asked me questions and one person typed. One thing I was very amazed about, the American government knew everything I had done during the past three years. They knew all of my conduct--such things as when I met somebody somewhere. For instance, when I played golf with the vice-consul, Mr. Nakamura. The American government was very cautious. They wanted to know what kind of people had a relationship to the Committee, who were the leaders, things like that. There were Japanese people who still hadn't been rounded up by that time. So I didn't want to talk about them. If what I said about them was different from what they actually were, I would hurt those people. So I said, "I can't tell you about them right now." I was afraid of telling any uncertain information regarding them. I said, "If you have records about them and want to make sure all the information on them is correct or not, I will answer 'yes' or 'no.' I won't say anything except that. Instead, I promise you that I will take responsibility for everything the Emergency Service Committee has done." I kept insisting on that. Then they started threatening me, saying, "If you insist on that, we will put you into a jail." So, I said, "What do you mean by jail? This camp is just like a jail. I will never be afraid no matter where I would be put because I am already in a place like a jail! I have worked for the promotion of friendship between Japan and America, but I've never done anything that would not benefit America." It was almost five in the afternoon. I said, "If I miss dinner, I won't be able to have anything to eat. So if you still have something you want to ask me, come back tomorrow." I said that because I was afraid to say unnecessary things that would hurt others. After I went back to my friends, they had saved dinner for me. I told the important people that I was asked such and such questions, so they should be careful what they said when they were asked.

I was assigned to be a leader in Louisiana, too. We were not forced to work in North Dakota, but in Louisiana, we had to work.

Y: What kind of work were you forced to do?

S: They were poor jobs like raking the ground in the forest. But I thought it was good for us to do that. We could go outside and eat lunch. It's better than being confined all the time. But people felt bad about undertaking jobs that were forced work.

Y: Did everybody work like that in turn?

S: Yes, they did. Some sly people tried to neglect that duty. They tried to avoid doing the work.

Y: Was there any argument between the people who worked hard and those who neglected it?

S: When *Tenchosetsu* [Emperor's Birthday] arrived in Louisiana, we celebrated it and had some good food and sake. We wanted to do "*Banzai-Sansho*" [Give three cheers to the Emperor], but I said we'd better hold back the words. But someone interrupted saying, "*Tenoheika Banzai!*" [Long live the Emperor!]. What was worse, the person who screamed was a minister. Once one person took the lead, nobody could refrain from screaming the words, since cheering was the nature of the things we did on *Tenchosetsu*. I reasoned with them not to say that, knowing that the administration people had accepted our plan to have a ceremony. What's more, they had offered us good food. I told the rest that we should express our gratitude to them and refrain from going too far.

Y: How did the administration people react to it?

S: They didn't show much reaction. We have *Tenchosetsu* only once a year, so they must have overlooked that.

Y: How did you spend most of your time in the camp?

S: Some learned *Shuji* [Japanese calligraphy] or the *Noh* chant. I thought those things were good for mental training.

Y: How about yourself? What did you do?

S: I played golf often. Spending days in camp is no good for health. So I negotiated with the administration people to get permission to establish a golf course, which they permitted.

Y: How did you get golf clubs?

S: They were sent by my family outside. As a rule, playing sports in the camp

was not permitted.

Y: Then playing the Japanese sports such as *kendo* was not permitted?

S: According to the rules, we had to get permission. We didn't play *kendo* there.

Y: Was that because it wasn't permitted?

S: We couldn't afford to play *kendo*. If you play golf, you just need a stick or a golf club and a ball. We could just hit a ball on the ground inside the camp. We never went outside.

Y: Except for the forced work?

S: Then they kept strict watch over us. Guards carrying guns always stood and watched.

Y: Would you tell us what the security system was like?

S: The camp was surrounded by wire fences with the bars of the fence pointed toward the inside of the camp. You couldn't climb up it. I don't remember whether it happened in Montana or not, but an old man went out of his mind and tried to climb up the fence. That happened right after I had finished breakfast. I found him trying to do that, so I ran toward him to stop him. I saw guards trying to shoot at him, so I screamed, "Don't shoot at him! He can't cross over the fence anyway!" I told them just to pull him down because he was out of his mind. But they shot him down. I felt so sorry for him. Persons like him who went out of their minds were hospitalized for the time being, but they ended up being killed.

Y: You mean killed in the hospital? Was there such a precedent?

S: Yes, there was. I knew a young man who went out of his mind. He was still in his late twenties or early thirties. I took good care of him because he was out of his mind. But everything he did was very strange so we put him in the hospital. There were two to my knowledge, a young man and an older one, whom we wondered of.

I was permitted to attend my son's [Hidehiko Shimizu] wedding at Manzanar in November 1943 and I never returned to Louisiana. Most of my time [at Manzanar] was spent playing golf and relaxing. I remained at Manzanar until the spring of 1945. My wife and I were two of the early returnees to Los Angeles.

Y: Before the interview, you said that there were many Japanese who left their houses while they were in the camp who found that they couldn't get them back when they returned. Would you elaborate on that?



S: The Japanese had a hard time renting a house or an apartment because the managers said they wouldn't lend to them. Blacks, Chicanos, and other ethnic groups had moved into Japanese town [Little Tokyo], and it was dangerous during the evenings.

I used to have a store in front of the police station.

Y: The shoe store has not been here from the beginning?

S: No, not here. We moved here after the war ended. The owner of the building where I first operated the shoe store before the war said he didn't give leases to anybody, so I could rent it while I was in the camp if I wanted to do so. The building plot was too large so I divided it into two parts and sub-let a part of it to a Filipino and the other part to a Jewish person. The Filipino opened a tailor shop and the Jew started a secondhand store. I paid ten thousand dollars for both of them, with five thousand dollars for each of them. I purchased their businesses. The owner of the building said I could force them out when I came back from the camp, but it would not have been fair to them. They ran their businesses with great care. If I drove them out of the place without recompense, they would have turned against the Japanese.

Y: So you paid them to have them out of the place?

S: I told other Japanese to take that way as I did and never drive them out. It was unsafe to pass through the roads in this town [Little Tokyo].

Y: You mean because of burglars?

S: Yes. We asked the police to do something about it, but they said they were busy, so they couldn't do anything. Then we said that we were going to hire night watchmen, and asked the police to permit them to carry pistols. We hired two Japanese night watchmen and ran our businesses.

Y: You did? How long did it take to start your business after you came back from the camp?

S: It took quite awhile.

Y: You must have started your business by keeping strict watch.

S: The Japanese made great sacrifices in their effort to reopen and develop this town. This town is in a good location in terms of geography because this is the terminal points of many transportation systems. So we didn't want Jewish or the other races to usurp this town. The Japanese who originally restarted this community made great efforts.

Y: I imagine you had many customers from the different ethnic groups. How did they treat you?

- S: Some people had lost their brothers or relatives in the Pacific area of war, so they couldn't help making it tough for us. Besides, the cause of the war was very awkward, wasn't it?
- Y: Yes, it was.
- S: Attacking Pearl Harbor without notification could be judged wrong from the humanitarian standpoint. Japan had no choice but to do that, but they did wrong.
- Y: Did you start your business when you came to America?
- S: I first worked for a Caucasian family as a gardener. The master of the house was very nice to me. His last name was Brooks. I saved \$2,500 during the five years I worked for them. That's the amount I saved, but not made.
- Y: That's great.
- S: It's worth today is one hundred thousand dollars.
- Y: Did you invest that money into your business?
- S: The start was very interesting. I used to have frequent access to the church.
- Y: You mean a Christian church?
- S: Yes, it was a Friends [Quaker] Church in Pasadena. I often went to the church which was very strict in its religion. I went to the church because I wanted to discipline my mind in order not to be involved in awkward circumstances and overcome temptations.
- Y: Had you been a Christian before you came to this country?
- S: No, I wasn't. I helped the missionary work there in the Friends Church and taught English. The family for which I worked for five years were devout Catholics.
- Y: Were they living in Los Angeles, too?
- S: They were millionaires in Pasadena. They had operated a lumber company in Chicago and had made a fortune and retired here in California. They were very nice to me for those five years I worked for them. When I made up my mind and told them that I was going to start a business and couldn't work for them anymore, they said they had expected me to work for them until they died and had even left a bequest in a will for me. I said I appreciated it, but I wanted to start my own business.

They passed away three years after I quit there. They really did leave something in a will for me as they had said. After they died, I was called to

go to court. They asked me how long I had been working for Mrs. Brooks' family. I was told they had left a will that said that I would be given their property if I worked for them until they died.

Y: So, your name was on the will they left? They must have thought much of you.

S: The house they lived in is still there. I visited there the other day. Their grandson was there. He said, "My grandad was always talking about you."

Y: What part of Japan were you from?

S: I'm from Wakayama Prefecture. I received my secondary education in Wakayama and came to this country right after that.

Y: What was your motivation to come to this country?

S: I wanted to learn in America and become a good man. My father [Iwazo Shimizu] was strongly against my decision but my mother [Matsu Shimizu] wasn't. She said, "You may go anywhere you want to. I believe you will do okay wherever you go." My mother trusted me that much. So I always kept it in my mind so that I wouldn't ever betray my mother. You will become a mother someday. I tell you such a thing [like words my mother said to me] turned out to be a help that remains in your mind throughout your life. I really appreciated my mother because the words she gave me saved me when I had to be patient with something.

Y: How did you come? You came a long time ago to this country.

S: It took twenty-one days by ship in those days.

Y: At which port did you arrive?

S: Ships to the United States from Japan in those days arrived either in Seattle or San Francisco. I arrived in Seattle.

Y: How did you get permission to enter the country?

S: I was first accepted as an immigrant, being excluded from citizenship rights.

I didn't have the right of property ownership. So I had to ask somebody who was a U. S. Citizen to help me. I had a friend who was a Japanese lawyer [Mr. Tanigoshi] who was married to a Caucasian lady. I bought my first house under her parents' name. I think it was when my son [Hidehiko Shimizu] was born—that I needed some guardian, so they acted as guardians. I paid them much in token of my thanks to them.

Y: How did you rent the site when you started the shoe store?

S: We [Japanese immigrants] could rent land according to the U. S. commercial

treaty with Japan. We could do that in the commercial districts, but farmers couldn't. They couldn't lease land. What they did was ask somebody who was a U. S. citizen or they used their children's name. They had to have a guardian.

Y: In retrospect, how do you feel about your camp life?

S: It's miserable for a man to live under such circumstances when there are no future prospects.

Y: Did you receive news about the war going on between Japan and America in the camps? Did you hear that from the administration people?

S: No, we heard news on the radio.

Y: So you were permitted to listen to the radio?

S: Yes, they let us hear it because they ran only news that was convenient to America. We couldn't foresee how the war would turn out until they dropped the atomic bombs.

Y: So you felt very uneasy?

S: Oh, yes, we did. Most of us never thought that we could go back to Los Angeles and make a living there again. The ministers thought they could never go back to where they had been and preach to people; so they acted selfish.

Y: I see. People felt they would spend their lives in the camp?

S: We thought all of us would be sent back to Japan, even after peace came. We couldn't think of other choices. We never thought we could make a Japanese community again.

Y: Then what were their reactions when the war ended and they were released?

S: When I came back to Los Angeles, the war had not ended yet, but America was already on the way to winning at the time we were released. We didn't know about it at that time, but we felt that Japan would be defeated. When I came back and tried to reopen the shoe store, I had a hard time stocking shoes. I had to have a last year's record, otherwise the producers wouldn't sell me a pair. So, I thought over the situation and wrote a letter to the president of the famous Florsheim Company in Chicago. He has been very nice to me. The letter said, "I've just come back, but, as you know, we were stopped from running a business through unavoidable circumstances. Therefore, I don't have a last year's record. Is there any way that I can stock shoes?" I received a reply from him saying, "Place your order on any shoes you want." So, I ordered immediately. They sent them in a matter of three months. People who were working at a shoe store which was under the direct management of Florsheim came all the way to see our stock. They said they were surprised that I could stock all those shoes. I was grateful to him.

- Y: What is the name of the president?
- S: Mr. Florsheim. He was a person of firm character. I received three hundred pairs of shoes from him. After that, the other wholesalers with whom I did business before the war offered to see what they could do for me. Living seriously and not making a [big] profit for my own benefit in running my business helped. I really learned that.
- Y: Do you have anything you'd like to add for this interview?
- S: Well, I feel strongly that living seriously in ordinary times saves us, no matter what happens to us.
- Y: Would you like to ask him a question, Paul?
- C: Yes. Do you remember Reverend Herbert Nicholson?
- S: He visited the camps.
- C: Do you recall when he visited?
- S: Yes. I know him, He often visited many camps. He did many things to help the internees when nobody turned to us. He did things that ordinary people didn't do. I really felt that way.
- Y: What did he do for them when he visited?
- S: He did liaison work between the internees and society. They asked him to do things that they wanted him to do. Once he promised them to do something, he carried it out without fail. He negotiated with the administration people, and he looked into things outside if they asked him to do so. He truly did many kindnesses for them. I didn't personally ask of him such things, but the other internees said he helped them a lot.
- Y: Can you recall what they asked him?
- S: I don't particularly know what they asked, but I saw them gathered and asking him something.
- Y: Was he able to speak to any internee who wanted to talk with him?
- S: Oh, yes, he could.
- Y: Was there any other person who visited the camp?
- S: It was not easily permitted. Only that minister [Nicholson] did, as far as I remember.
- Y: We'd like to thank you very much for your frank expression of your ideas

on behalf of the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project.

S: You are quite welcome. I would be glad if this helps you.

Y: Once again, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The 1907 Gentleman's Agreement grew out of fears in California of heavy Oriental, especially Japanese, immigration that would threaten general employment. Japan protested various Congressional proposals to bar or limit Japanese entry into the United States. Japan proposed to halt unrestricted emigration to America, and in return President Theodore Roosevelt agreed to discourage any laws limiting Japanese immigration. Thereafter, Japanese immigration was reduced but not ended.

<sup>2</sup>The following Japanese protest refers to Japanese nationals arrested on December 7, 1941. "Thirteen Japanese subjects who were arrested at Los Angeles on the same day were jammed into narrow stifling prison cell of a capacity for two persons and consequently they experienced great difficulty even in easing nature. The next day they were sent to the Federal Penitentiary at Terminal Island without breakfast or lunch till six o'clock in the afternoon." The American reply states: "The Japanese Government complains also concerning the treatment given to Japanese subjects at Terminal Island, California. It was found that more than one hundred Japanese subjects entered the Terminal Island Institution during the afternoon of December 8, 1941, and were quartered in a section of the institution separate from that occupied by the other inmates . . . The formalities connected with their entrance into the institution took several hours, but while they were waiting for their admission hot coffee and sandwiches were served to them at intervals." See *Foreign Relations, 1943*, Vol. III., p. 1052 and p. 1076.

<sup>3</sup>The Japanese government, as part of its informal agreement to apply the Geneva Convention to its war prisoners, stipulated that such war prisoners were to remain exempt from any forced work which that capturing power may impose on its captives.

<sup>4</sup>In regards to the Livingston golf course, see the earlier interview in the study with Mukaeda by Clark.

<sup>5</sup>This incident appears printed as part of a Japanese protest note in *Foreign Relations, 1944*, Vol. V., "According to reliable information received by Japanese Government, Kensaburo Oshima, whose mind had been deranged, was walking toward barbed wire fence May 12th, 1942 at about 8 A.M. Soldier guard, leveling his pistol, approached him. A Japanese who happened to witness that cried out at top voice, 'That's a mad man, don't fire,' and tried stop soldier shoot. Sentinel on watch tower heard cry and hurriedly lowered his gun but soldier who had been following Oshima still continued his pursuit and having cornered victim within short distance, three metres or so, fired at him twice. Poor lunatic had his skull shot through and fell dead on spot." (p. 1113). The American reply, printed only in part, states: "The guard fired only after the internee had climbed over two barbed wire fences surrounding the internment camp and was in the process of climbing the outside

fence." (p. 1113, fn. 91). This occurred at the Army camp at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

<sup>6</sup>Other interviews in the Japanese American Project at the California State University, Fullerton, Oral History Program which deal with the postwar return of the Japanese Americans to Los Angeles' Little Tokyo include the interviews with Kango Kunitsugu, 1973, O. H. 1346, and Katsuma Mukaeda, 1973, O. H. 1341a, both by Dave Biniasz.



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