

## Wellesley Public Library, Fireside Chats – Telling Our Stories (condensed version)

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My story began 93 years ago yesterday. I was born in Kobe, Japan, when our family went back to Japan. It seems that my mother preferred living in the United States where my two older sisters and older brother were born. My father had a successful importing business and he later bought a home in Northern New Jersey. He commuted six days a week by train to his office on Fifth Avenue in New York City.

I do not remember much about my early childhood, but I was told we drove to Philadelphia for the Sesquicentennial Celebration in 1926. I do remember the ticker tape parade for Charles Lindbergh after he returned from Paris. We had front row seats in my father's showroom window. I entered first grade in 1927 in the small one-room schoolhouse which still stands today as the Lyndhurst Historical Society's museum. From third grade, I went up the hill to the Franklin Grammar School and could watch the Empire State Building being built.

I attended Lyndhurst High School, graduating in 1939, and applied to Cornell and was accepted into the College of Arts & Sciences where I entered the pre-medical program. I was always considered to be a foreign student although English was the only language I knew. All male students had to sign up for the ROTC because Cornell was a Land Grant College of New York. Since I was not a citizen, I had to sign up for Physical Education. The track coach let me train with the team even though I was not good enough to compete.

The Pearl Harbor attack occurred during my junior year. My world changed and I suddenly became an enemy alien. I had no problems on campus, but I was surprised by the reaction of the foreign students who were mainly from Central and South America. They congratulated me whenever Japan scored a victory but I told them to please not make any fuss because I was very wary of the FBI. I had to turn in a camera which was returned after the war. I had to notify the Police whenever I left Ithaca and returned. Fortunately, I did not have to wear a picture ID so nobody knew that I was an enemy alien.

Cornell's State College of Agriculture had a big annual Farm & Home week in February. I heard Mrs. Roosevelt started to attend when her husband was Governor of New York. The Dean of the State College of Home Economics hosted a breakfast for First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt with student leaders. As president of the Cosmopolitan Club, I was chosen to represent the foreign students even though I was an enemy alien. Looking back now, that was really amazing.

After completing my junior year, I was ready to return home for the summer, but my father told me to remain at Cornell because there was nothing for me to do in NJ. After a few weeks, I received a Western Union Telegram from the State Department advising me of the Diplomatic Exchange Ship, the Gripsholm, leaving for Japan. I did not expect to go back to Japan but my father decided that it would be better if we returned to Japan because all of the Japanese-Americans on





the West Coast were ordered into internment camps. We sold or gave away our household goods, being allowed only to carry \$300 and a suitcase of belongings.

We set sail on June 16, 1942 with guaranteed safe passage. The boat lights were always on and our location was radioed to all countries. There were about 1,600 passengers and we picked up 400 more from South America at Rio de Janeiro. Entering the Rio harbor at night was really beautiful because there was no black-out. We then sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and landed at Lorenzo Marques in Portuguese East Africa. All of the arrangements for exchange had been made by neutral countries and we were put on a Japanese boat, the Asama Maru. Life changed immediately with the Japanese taking control who tried to make us more Japanese. We sailed across the Indian Ocean and landed in Singapore which was controlled by the Japanese. We were able to do some sightseeing and then it was off to Yokohama. I was amazed how Japan did not appear to be a mighty nation that could attack the United States.

My main job was to learn the language so I could be prepared for the army and was inducted in April 1943. Luckily, I was known to be interested in medical school, so they assigned me to the medical corps. Later I received orders to report to the Army Air Force Headquarters in Tokyo. My job was to listen to any English language broadcast or military communications to try to glean valuable information but of course there were no secrets broadcast. I had an easy time listening to broadcasts of news and music, commercial free. The food was adequate, and they served noodles whenever we asked. I started to put on weight and felt guilty because the civilians did not have enough food.

I heard about the peace accord after the atom bombs were dropped. On August 16, 1945 Japan time, we were told to assemble in the courtyard in our dress uniforms for a very important broadcast. The recorded voice of the Emperor was broadcast declaring Japan's surrender. It was the first time in Japanese history that the Emperor addressed the people.

I was able to enter Medical School in Japan and graduated in 1950. I returned to the US in 1952 for training in Pathology at Cleveland City Hospital. I received further training at Mt. Sinai Hospital in NYC and later had staff positions in New Jersey. Kyoko and I were married in 1957 and raised four children in Maplewood, NJ. I became a naturalized American citizen after the McCarran-Walter Act was passed. After retiring full-time in 1988, I worked part time until 2005 when we moved to Wellesley to watch our three grandchildren grow up.



*In 2014, Shig was honored by Cornell University with the Vanneman Award. Although his education was interrupted by WWII his dedication to Cornell was unwavering, and he was an active alum, serving the Class of 1943 for more than 60 years. Please use the following link if you would like to hear him speak about his life:*

<https://www.cornell.edu/video/vanneman-award-winner-shigeo-kondo>