

CHILD PRISONER



ILLUSTRATION: MITS KATAYAMA

CHAPTER 1

BIRTHDAY CAKE & THE FBI

*F*ebruary 21, 1942 was set to be a pleasant day for the Takahashi family. It was my eldest sister's birthday. Kazu said her eleventh birthday was a very special birthday, but the second oldest sister, Nobu, piped up with "she says that every year...."

Kazu ignored her younger sister's comment. She was two years older than her sister Nobu, at least until Nobu turned ten on her birthday in July. Excited, Kazu had difficulty falling asleep, anticipating her birthday. My fifth birthday had been twenty days earlier, and it was certainly a memorable day for me. I had hoped we would celebrate Kazu's birthday with just as much fun. For certain, Mama would make some of Kazu's favorite dishes for dinner and we would have birthday cake for dessert. None of us anticipated the terrible day that would unfold—the day our world was turned upside down.

That fateful morning, all the ingredients to make Kazu's birthday cake sat on the kitchen counter. Mama had put them out the night before in preparation to bake Kazu's cake first thing in the morning. But in the

CHILD PRISONER

pre-dawn hours while my family slept, a change in the United States had already begun to unfold—a change that would make this day life-altering for our family and for tens-of-thousands of other people of Japanese descent living in America.

Two days earlier, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had signed Executive Order 9066. This presidential order gave the U.S. military the authority to forcibly remove and incarcerate anyone they determined to be a threat to the security of the nation, regardless of whether or not they were U.S. citizens. The government used this order to forcibly remove people of Japanese descent living in the western United States.

However, even before Executive Order 9066 was signed on February 19, 1942, the U.S. government had previously been investigating various Japanese, German, and Italian immigrants as potential threats to the security of the United States. On Dec. 7, 1941, the day Pearl Harbor was bombed, the FBI and the military started to round-up those identified as potentially the most dangerous, treating them as civilian prisoners of war or “enemy aliens.” President Roosevelt authorized this action under the Alien Enemies Act of 1798. My father was one of more than 17,000 Japanese immigrants, along with nearly 15,000 additional immigrants of German, Italian, and “other” descent whom the U.S. government confined during World War II in Department of Justice internment camps. This was soon followed by a massive U.S. military action, authorized under Executive Order 9066, that forced into concentration camps approximately 120,000 *Nikkei*, almost all living on the U.S. mainland. *Nikkei* included all people

of Japanese descent who emigrated from Japan to the United States and their citizen descendants. My family would be swept up in this mass incarceration of innocent *Nikkei*—citizens and noncitizens alike—and imprisoned in American concentration camps.

No one in my family remembers the exact time on that fateful morning, but it was pitch dark outside. Mama, who almost always woke up early, was still asleep when a loud banging on our front door woke her up. She answered the door in her robe. Six men from the FBI and Seattle Police stormed into the house, pushing Mama aside. Their loud voices woke my sister Nobu, but she stayed in her bedroom upstairs, wondering what the intrusion was about.

Apparently, the agents were looking for my papa, searching every room until they found him in bed, still asleep. They shook him awake and ordered him to get dressed. One agent watched Papa closely, glaring at him. He even followed Papa's every move as Papa uncomfortably went through his morning routine.

Other agents ransacked closets, overturned drawers, and generally made a mess of each room. Two agents began to ascend the stairs to the second floor. Mama shouted up to my sisters in Japanese, "*Hayaku! Hayaku! Kimono kinasai! Hayaku!*" ("Hurry! Hurry! Get dressed! Hurry!") She knew Nobu and Kazu were still in their pajamas, so Mama must have been trying to save them from embarrassment.

As soon as the agents heard Mama shout in Japanese—the language of the enemy—they immediately bounded up the rest of the stairs drawing their guns. My sisters were terrified as strange men burst

into their bedroom. Nobu thought the FBI agents looked menacing with their guns in their hands, brandishing their weapons in a threatening way. Kazu shouted in English, "Get out! Get out!"

Kazu was mighty courageous that morning of her eleventh birthday! Yet, inwardly she shook from fright as she watched an agent carefully search the pockets of her dresses hanging in the closet. Nobu froze when one agent showed her his gun and asked, "Does your father have one of these?"

Before that day, the only guns Nobu had ever seen were in the toy box. In these terrifying minutes, Nobu was subdued, which I thought was unusual for her.

In all the chaos, one of the FBI agents realized Mama didn't speak English. He ordered Kazu, as the eldest child, to serve as an interpreter. The other FBI agents continued to ransack the house, never mentioning a search warrant. Kazu was stunned and repulsed as she watched an agent in the kitchen sift through the rice bin, and flour and sugar canisters with unwashed hands. My parents did not know what they were looking for, and the men never bothered to explain.

I don't know when I woke up but I felt a general sense of commotion and tension in the household. At five years old, I was an outside observer. No one seemed to notice me as I stared silently, invisible. Even the baby, Midori, wailed loudly the whole time. We stood by in our pajamas, helpless and vulnerable, as these strangers invaded and raided our home.

The agents confiscated Mama's prayer book and her handwritten telephone book because they were in Japanese. A short while later, the agents appeared elated

to find Papa's valued traditional Japanese swords that were stored high in the closet and pushed far back for safekeeping from the children. They also found Papa's longbow, which was unstrung at the time so the kids could play with it without harm. These treasures came from Papa's family in Japan—a family of archers. Archery was one sport that Papa had excelled in.

When the FBI agents were finished searching our home, two men grabbed Papa and pinned him between them as they whisked him out of the house into a waiting car. Papa was not even given a moment to say goodbye to his family. No one told Mama where they were taking Papa. As the cars with Papa and the agents pulled away, we all watched, side by side, through the living room window.

Kazu glanced at Mama who looked frozen, her mind somewhere else. Immediately, fear gripped Kazu as she panicked, wondering what would become of our family. Nobu burst into uncontrollable sobs so strong she had problems breathing. She even wondered if it was possible for a person to choke and actually die from crying too hard. By all accounts, I was there at the window, too, but I have no direct recollection of Papa being taken away.

Not long after the car pulled away, Nobu stopped sobbing and turned her attention to our baby sister, Midori, who was screeching. Nobu had a hard time trying to quiet down Midori. Amid the stunned confusion of Papa being taken away, my family realized that I had disappeared. When Mama and my older sisters recovered somewhat from their shock, they began looking for me, calling my name. I could hear them, but for some reason I couldn't call out and answer.

CHILD PRISONER

After a frantic search, they finally found me crying in the corner of the living room, shaking beneath a pile of blankets thrown on the floor when the agents ransacked our home. Once my family found me, they forgot about my trauma. Once again, each of us became encased in our own emotional upheaval and the sudden absence of Papa.

In later years, I heard many family stories about that day and what each family member experienced. Recounting that day, I asked Nobu if we actually ate birthday cake in spite of Papa being taken away. Nobu couldn't remember, but Kazu definitely recalled that her birthday celebration was cancelled. In fact, it was Kazu herself who asked Mama to cancel the occasion and Mama nodded in agreement without any comment. The birthday cake never made it to the oven that day. Apparently, even I, considered a champion complainer, did not complain that day.

Later that afternoon, Mama sent Kazu to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) building in Seattle, a little more than a mile from our house. Kazu was to take Papa his pajamas and other necessities. It was strange that Mama knew Papa would need pajamas when Papa himself was quite sure he would be released in time to join the family for dinner and birthday cake. But then again, Papa was always an optimist, while Mama considered herself to be a realist.

Mama put a pack of Papa's favorite Chesterfield cigarettes in the package along with pajamas, a toothbrush, shaver, a book, and snacks. Funny, the only things I remember are the cigarettes. And that's about all I remember about Kazu's errand that day.

BIRTHDAY CAKE & THE FBI

Kazu had a long solitary walk on her eleventh birthday. Reflecting on that time, I wondered, *How did she know where the INS building was located?* It was pretty much a straight shot to the INS building from our house, but still, it was a mystery how she knew where to go. Years later, Kazu herself couldn't recall how she knew the way. Any thoughts of birthday cake and celebrating her special day were far from Kazu's concerns. She was worried about Papa. When Kazu arrived at the INS building where Papa was jailed, the guards told her to leave the package with them and they would give it to Papa. Kazu refused. She told them, "My mother specifically told me to hand this directly to my father."

Nearby there was an *Issei* woman—first generation Japanese in the U.S.—pleading in Japanese to see her husband. She had medication that he needed to take. Kazu helped her by translating her plea into English for the guards. Both Kazu and the woman ended up in chairs, waiting. Three different guards approached Kazu, each one suggesting that she

Kazu. This photo was taken for her eleventh birthday to send to Papa.

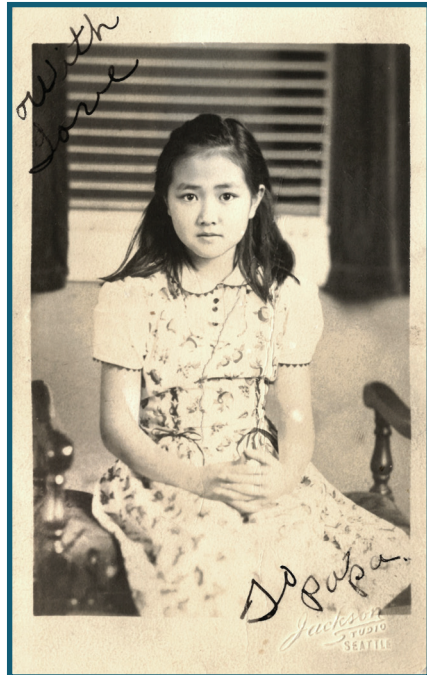


PHOTO: NAKAGAWA PRIVATE COLLECTION

leave the package and go home before it got too dark. Later, when Kazu returned home, she told us, “I put on my stubborn face, held on tightly to the package, and continued to wait it out.”

One of the guards must have had kids or felt sorry for Kazu sitting there so long, patiently waiting. Whatever the reason, this particular guard quietly came up to Kazu and just said, “Follow me.”

Kazu followed him through a series of gates that the guards opened and slammed shut after the nice guard and Kazu passed through. Kazu was intimidated and had grim thoughts of maybe being punished for her willful insistence. The possibility of even being murdered entered her mind. She thought, *No one will find me here.*

She was beginning to regret her determination. Finally, they reached the last gate. There were two guards and one asked, “Who is your father? Is he the fat Takahashi, or the skinny Takahashi?”

Immediately, Kazu said, “The fat Takahashi.”

One guard left and the other two guards engaged in subdued conversation while Kazu waited. Then, from around the corner Papa emerged and walked toward Kazu. She ran and hugged him with no restraint. In that moment, Kazu felt pure joy and a lot of relief. Then, she handed Papa the package just as Mama had instructed. Papa immediately gave the package to the guard and then sat down with Kazu on his lap. They did not talk long. Kazu tried to act brave, but she was so scared. Later, she told us she had a feeling that Papa was going to be gone for a long time. “It’s amazing how you can feel joyful one second,” Kazu explained, “and have it all melt away so quickly.”

When Kazu left the INS building, she cried most of the way home. She didn't notice if the *Issei* woman with the medication for her husband was still waiting or not. Kazu worried, asking herself, *Who will take care of us? Without Papa making money for us to live on, how are we going to avoid hunger?*

Kazu wondered if she could get a job and provide for the family needs. By the time she got home, she was too tired physically and too emotionally spent to talk. She went straight to her room and cried through the night.

Late that night, I got out of bed to use the bathroom. That's when I heard Mama crying in the living room by herself. This was the second time in my life I had seen Mama cry. The first time had been a few months earlier when *Obaachan* (Grandmother) died. That was when I learned that grown-ups cried, too. But on this night Mama's crying was different. It sounded frightening. I wanted to hug Mama, but I could not bring myself to approach her. I'm not sure if I wanted to comfort her or to be comforted *by* her. Maybe both. I would never forget that moment in my childhood when I realized the adults could also be scared and broken. Many times since that day, I have regretted not going to Mama.

Forever after, that day would be remembered not only as Kazu's eleventh birthday, but even more as being the first day of a prolonged, sorrow-laden experience for our whole family.



Many times I have wondered, *What was going through Papa's mind on that frightful day? As time*

CHILD PRISONER

passed, Mama and the girls seemed to have even more to discuss about that unforgettable day.

Years later, we prodded Papa to tell us about his incarceration experience after he was taken from our midst. Papa rarely had much to say, and getting Papa to say something new became almost a game for us daughters. It was like a baby learning how to talk. His vocabulary was limited to one or two words and then slowly expanded to more and more words. His thoughts and memories on other matters were normal, but he faltered when trying to talk about being torn away from his family and locked up as an “enemy alien.” As he shared more of his memories, Papa also shared more of his emotions that he had hidden behind his words. He was always a verbal man, so it was even stranger to witness his struggle recalling and sharing these stories.

Papa did tell us that during his ride with the FBI agents to the INS building, he resolved to be patient. Papa knew he had done nothing wrong, so he believed he would be released soon after a short interview. He thought of a few minor infractions that he had committed, but it didn’t seem possible that these small violations would be the cause for punishment of any consequence. Papa remembered staying out past the curfew on a few occasions, double parking his car and getting a ticket, and the time he spoke up for one of his workers at the cannery who may have been involved in poor judgment regarding a fellow worker. Papa said he searched his memory for any action on his part that may have led the authorities to question his adherence to the law. He could only conclude that the FBI apprehending

him was simply a mistake. He thought, *Everything will turn out good once I am cleared. I won't be here for long.*

Papa said that by late afternoon on that first day, while sitting in the jail, one of the prisoners locked up in the same large cell, gently shook my father's shoulder. He told Papa there were many fellow prisoners who were in grief, tormented, worrying about their families. He also asked Papa, "Could you try to not snore so loud? You're disturbing them even more!" Papa wanted to accommodate his fellow prisoners, but staying awake so as not to snore was a difficult task. Convinced he would be released soon from custody, Papa found it difficult to stay awake and returned to napping. He gave sleeping without snoring a yeoman's try.

Unfortunately, by the end of the long day Papa's optimism was greatly shaken. All the prisoners were ordered to undress. The men were shocked and humiliated at having to stand naked in front of the guards. When Papa told me that story many years later, I did not push him for more information. He needed some privacy. I could imagine how hard it must've been for these men to hold on to their dignity in such a situation.

From his cell, Papa could look out the jail window and almost see our house across the valley. Many of Papa's fellow inmates openly wept. Even Papa admitted to feeling teary. As dinnertime came and went on the first day in jail, and he was still being held, Papa wondered how much his girls missed him. He wondered how much longer it would take for his jailers to correct their mistake and release him back to his family.

Papa had no idea that it would be almost two years before he was reunited with his family.