

StoryCorps Interview at the Chicago History Museum

80 year old Jean Mishima, tells her friend, Nikki Smith, the story of her childhood experience in a Japanese Internment Camp during World War II and how it impacted her and her parent's lives. Jean is now president of the Chicago Japanese American Historical Society.

“That feeling of total isolation is still very vivid in my mind.”

Jean: The camps were built like army barracks. There were fourteen barracks in one block, a mess hall one end, a recreation center in the other, with the men and women's latrine and a laundry room in the center. And the only part they had running water was in the mess hall and in the laundry room. I just turned six, my sister was four, my brother was about a year and a half. The five of us were assigned a room, 20x24.

I remember my first day in camp because we were at Chila River, that's Arizona. We were on top of a ditch, there was a rattlesnake on the ditch and these men were just standing around watching it. There was a lot of hila monsters and scorpions, and a lot of sandstorms - it just covers everything. I remember being in a sandstorm and I couldn't see the hands in front of my face and no one was holding my hand and being terrified. To this day, I don't know how I got home, but that feeling of total isolation is still very vivid in my mind.

My father did lose everything, everything he had worked very hard for. He lost his self-respect, his self-esteem, and his self worth, because the family structure broke down, because you ate in the mess hall -

Nikki: He was no longer head of his family.

Jean: Right, he was no longer the breadwinner.

He left the camp and came to Chicago, and he came back and got my mother and the rest of us. When he came to Chicago he started drinking and gambling and my mother divorced him. So she became a single parent with three kids to raise. And then my mother found a friend who helped her open a cleaning store on Sheridan Road and we lived in back of the store.

I attended about six different grammar schools before I graduated from grammar school, so my foundation and my education was very poor. I eloped when I was a teenager, very young, and I had four children in seven years. Eventually we were separated for about 4-7 years.

In the meantime I decided I needed to get my education in order to get a job, and eventually I started working part time and going to night school. It took me sixteen years to get my bachelors, and I continued and I got my masters in guidance and counseling, and then I continued and got my masters in administration.

But I did not learn that we were incarcerated until I was an adult, it was never discussed at home. Some people have asked me, 'well, what are your feelings to United States?' Well I said, 'this is my country!'

Nikki: Jean, now that you're retired, you continue to work tirelessly on behalf of the Chicago Japanese American historical society, what drives you to do this work? Why do you keep at it?

Jean: Well, I think it's very important to educate the general public on the Japanese Americans experiences, because after 9/11 we had this hysteria up in the congress, which was understandable, and talk of rounding up all the Muslims, the Muslim Americans. So the Japanese American citizen league says you can't do this, you're repeating history. And I think it's important to learn about history so it will not be repeated.