

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH AKIKO SEITELBACH

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Akiko Seitelbach wishes to express her appreciation to her close friends Bernadette Roig and Paul Pittari for their assistance in editing this history.

Mohammad Athar: This begins a second session with Akiko Seitelbach on January 27, 2016, in Monroe Township, New Jersey, with Mohammad Athar [the interviewer], and I am joined by:

Linda Ikeda: Linda Ikeda.

MA: Okay, last time we left off we finished up the war experience and we were getting into the occupation of Japan, and you said you got a job as an interpreter for the Marines, then later, the Army. I was wondering if you could tell us that story of how you got the job.

Akiko Seitelbach: Tell that story? Well, it's a real strange story. Is that okay?

MA: Yes, that is fine.

AS: While living with my aunt in Isahaya, I went to Nagasaki hoping to find a job. Did I tell you about that? I went to the home of my sister's friend, Miss Hashimoto, hoping she could help me. She knew I was not a professional seamstress, but she knew I could make anything. She said, "I will pay you if you make me something to wear." It took me forever to make one blouse. It came out beautifully, but I could not make a living at it.

I was a little upset that night. I noticed my shoe had a big hole in it. I ran around the atomic bomb site so it got burnt. I took the shoe to the repair shop, and they wanted, I don't remember how much. It was something like—a lot of money to me, but I needed the shoes so I left them there.

I decided to leave Isahaya. I was causing hardships on my aunt because of the shortages resulting from the end of the war. I was able to find a place with one of my relatives at that time.

MA: And where was that?

AS: In Nagasaki. I hardly knew them, but you know, it's a Japanese family so there were a lot of relatives. You can go anywhere you want if they know who you are. But, I could not ask them to feed me. Since they didn't have enough food for themselves, I asked if I could just sleep there. Without food or money, I was really desperate. I walked through the desolate, dark streets of Nagasaki aimlessly thinking, I cannot go on living this way; maybe it's just easier if I kill myself.

It was cold, and I found myself looking into the dark water of Nagasaki Harbor. I shivered and slowly turned and walked back in the direction of the city. As I walked, I saw a fortune teller's sign on a lantern. A man was sitting there. When I approached him, he looked at me and said, "Oh, my gosh. You have a very strange fortune. Tonight you will find a job. Then, eventually you will end up in America." I thought he was crazy, so I thanked him, paid him, and left. I needed food, not my fortune read! When I got back to my family's place, someone said, "There was an American who came with a truck looking for you." A truck? Who? She told me it was a young American; he was a Marine or something. He was driving a two-and-a-half ton truck and he was looking for me at my aunt's house in Isahaya, but I was no longer staying there. American soldiers used to come to Isahaya because my aunt had a sewing school. And since I

had been living there earlier, and spoke English, I used to talk to them. My aunt's granddaughter was very ill. She had TB [Tuberculosis] I think at that time. American soldiers used to bring them food when they came to have insignias sewn on their uniforms. When I was planning to leave Isahaya, I didn't tell any of the soldiers I was going away, but this young Marine, now I remember who he was. He was a young man, very young. He used to come and bring my cousin some food. Later, as I was falling asleep, I heard somebody honking the horn of a truck. I ran downstairs and that Marine was there. He told me that when he went to my aunt's house in Isahaya, she told him that I had gone to Nagasaki. My aunt told him to find me, and ask me if I needed any of the things I left behind. (I needed bedding and clothes and everything else.) He told me he would be able to take me to my aunt's house and pick up my things because he had a truck. I also thought if I went to my aunt's house she would give me something to eat because I was very hungry. On the way to Isahaya, I noticed that he was not a good driver. I think he just got his license. He was only about eighteen years old. He wanted to show me that he could drive that big truck. The trip to my aunt's house was less than twenty miles, but we have to go over the top of a mountain. It's was a narrow road, but it was drivable.

We were about half way up the hill and the truck stalled and came to a stop. I said, "You are stopping right in the middle of nowhere." It was pitch dark, but people, military people were coming from the opposite direction. He said, "Okay, if they catch me with a Japanese girl they will put me in jail. Do you mind hiding in the back of this truck? I am driving a laundry truck so there are lots of clothes there. It's warm there." He tried to stop somebody and ask for help to restart the truck. I climbed in the back of the truck-- the laundry was nice. At least it wasn't that cold. I was almost asleep when he came back and told me that they were able to restart the engine, but we had to go back to the motor pool in Nagasaki to fix the truck. He said, "Can you still hide back there? (Do I have a choice?) We drove back. I fell asleep. I was tired and hungry. When we arrived at the motor pool, I looked outside at all the lights and trucks. It was nighttime so not too many people were there. He asked if I could stay there until they come to fix the truck and then he'd take me home. "Could you just hide there? Don't say anything. Don't run out because they'll catch you and think you're a spy or something." He left for awhile, but when he got back he told me to come out. He said, "I told the motor sergeant that I have a girl in my truck. I explained to him why I have you here." I followed him to the little barracks. The motor sergeant, who I thought was an old man, must have only been in his thirties. He was eating a light snack of ham and cheese. No, not ham and cheese, ham and egg. I must have looked at it hungrily because he asked if I was hungry. He didn't think I could speak. He gave me the snack. That was the best food I had ever tasted in my whole life! It was so delicious. I smiled. They were very happy. Then, they were talking to each other, what should they do? They were going to fix the truck and then this kid was going to take me to my aunt's house. I saw a movie magazine and I liked American movies. So, I took it out and was looking through it. I could read a little. The sergeant was watching me. He said, "Hey, can you read this?" I said, "A little bit." He says, "Oh, you speak English." I said, "No, a little bit." He showed me a knife and fork and ham. "Can you say this in English?" I could say knife and fork and ham. "Oh, good you speak English," he said. "I need an interpreter in this office so you can tell my cooks how to cook. They don't know how to cook. They don't know what we are saying." "Can you work for us as an interpreter?" He seemed curious. He said, "Oh, you don't want to work for an American." I said, "I cannot answer right now." The young truck driver took me to my relative's house. I realized that I could walk from my place to the motor pool, so the next day, I did. Since

I still didn't have anything to eat and I was cold, I decided to take that job. At that time, the Japanese government was providing all the interpreters to the Americans. I had to write my resume in Japanese. The sergeant took it to the Japanese government to see what kind of education I had and my background, so they can give me the title of interpreter. The next day, I think somebody came to my relative's house in the jeep and said, "I came to pick you up to come to our office." I was wearing a kimono. I didn't have anything else to wear. So, I sat in the jeep in a kimono. Everybody thought that was beautiful and wonderful because, it was new to them. I was told that the Japanese government was going to hire me as an interpreter. It paid three hundred yen a month. It was a lot of money at that time. I think to fix my shoes was seven yen or something. So, I said, "Three hundred? Wow. Okay." The sergeant said, "We will feed you all the ham and eggs you want." "We will teach you. Can you type?" I had never seen a typewriter in my life. He said, "We can teach you how to type. We have a little office work so you can type the report." That's how it happened. That's how I got the job.

MA: Okay.

AS: Because of the war, these Marines were matured. They were young soldiers, but older than I was. They treated me like a kid. They taught me English. One day it was funny when the telephone rang. I said, "What's that thing?" The motor sergeant said, "You have to answer it. It's your job." What am I supposed to say? I'm supposed to say "the motor pool"? The other party probably wouldn't know why a girl is answering. That was funny, but anyway, I got the job. When the Marines left--they were there for about two or three months--the American occupational Army came. They were not combat soldiers. They were to establish the headquarters in Nagasaki, but their main headquarters was in Sasebo, which was a naval base. Nagasaki was just a temporary place. By then, I had learned how to do a lot of office work so the American Army asked if I would work for them. I stayed with relatives in Sasebo and every morning a soldier would come in a jeep to pick me up. At least they fed me well! Eventually, they had a dormitory for the Army officers' maids and Japanese employees. Sasebo had been a large Japanese naval base so the building was already built. In the meantime, they taught me how to type and do Army administrative duties, like the daily reports.

MA: Just before you got the job as interpreter you mentioned that there was very little food, very little clothing, medicine, things you needed. Did you see that throughout your area, that other people did not have food, they did not have clothing?

AS: I didn't quite understand the question.

LI: He said did you see other people not having food, not having clothes?

AS: Yes, the Japanese didn't have food, or anything else. I don't know how, but American soldiers, were very generous. If they saw hungry kids, they gave them food.

MA: Did you see any instances where the soldiers caused any problems for other people or for yourself?

AS: No, not at all. General MacArthur had wonderful control over all the occupation forces. I'm not just saying that because I'm talking to an American, but I was very impressed with how General MacArthur controlled all those soldiers. They were wonderful.

MA: You met your husband around this time when you were at the naval base?

AS: No, a lot of time had passed. It was 1945, '46 when I got the job. My husband came--I'm getting confused. I don't remember.

MA: That is fine.

AS: We got married in 1953. I kept him waiting for four years, so it's 1949. Leo came to Japan with the occupation forces in 1948 or '49.

By then, I had acquired enough information about running an Army Administration Office. Those days, not many soldiers knew about Army Regulations concerning Army dependent travel, their housings, commissaries and PXs, etc. to make the lives of the Army dependents in Japan easier. I worked for a Sergeant Major in charge of the Adjutant's Office and he taught me everything I should know in order to be a good administrative assistant.

I met Leo at a company picnic. I was working at the Post Headquarters at that time, so they invited me to the picnic. I went to the picnic with a young soldier, but we had a fight because he was quite fresh. I told him to get lost; I didn't need him. He asked me how I was going to get home. I told him I could get home on my own. I was furious and I felt insulted. I stood by a tree, sulking, when Leo came into my life. He was cute. You've seen his picture, right?

MA: Yes.

AS: He came over and said, "Can I take your picture?" I said, "No," and glared at him. He said, "Oh, my god, what a face! You broke my camera with that face. What are you going to do?" So, I laughed. We had a wonderful time and he took me home. So, that's how I met him. Leo was with the occupation army, 34th Infantry regiment, at that time, stationed at the nearby army camp.

We started dating. Within a month, he wanted to get married. I said, "No, I cannot marry you." When he asked, "Why," I said, "I just met you." Yet, I knew he was a decent person. I could tell he really cared for me, but I said, "If I said no, I said no."

Then, the Korean War broke out. One day we were at the--NCO (Non-commissioned Officers) club. That was the only place we could go. I'm not a good dancer, so we just sat there and talked. As he dropped me off at my dormitory, he told me he was afraid they were going to send him to Korea the next day. He said, "I probably won't be able to contact you because we are not married, but I will ask my friend, George, if I could use his military address so you and I could write to each other." I knew George (at the time he was a staff sergeant in Leo's outfit) and his wife very well. They were so kind to us and we spent many evenings with them at their home, talking and playing canasta. The next day, Leo and George left for the Korean War.

Then the nightmare began for me. Sometimes I didn't hear from Leo for weeks at a time. American soldiers sent from Japan were no match for the North Koreans. I think North Koreans were well-trained soldiers, but the American soldiers were not combat ready. They were Occupation Army people, having really nice, cushy jobs. The Army didn't even have weapons. I heard they only gave them old rifles. The North Koreans were equipped with the latest automatic weapons. I heard about that because I worked for the Adjutant's office in the headquarters. If I was not connected to the Army I wouldn't have known. I heard all the details of certain divisions getting wiped out. I heard that sort of thing every day. I hoped I wouldn't hear that about Leo. Then, one day I went to the American Red Cross office--I always went there to get coffee for people in my office. That day, when I went there, I saw a soldier who was just skin and bones. He looked so tired. I could see that he had just come back from Korea. I asked him if he was okay. He replied that he was sent back because he was sick. I said, "Do you know anything about the 24th Division?" [24th Division included the 34th Infantry Regiment] Anyway, he said, "Yes, I was there and everybody got killed." I said, "What do you mean--everybody?" He then said, "Well, almost everybody." He didn't know Leo. I came back to the office and I cried. I told the captain what this soldier had told me. He told me not to listen to those things, but I could not help but believe him. I contacted George's wife and asked if she had heard from her husband. When she told me her husband was missing, I thought, Oh God, poor Leo. I should have said I would marry him, no matter what.

This is going to be a very long story of how I found out that Leo was alive. One morning, while I was sleeping, I suddenly woke up because I heard very clearly a man's voice saying "3rd of September." What will happen on the 3rd of September? It was August at the time. The third of September came and went--nothing happened. Around the 4th or the 5th of September, I came back from lunch to my office and my boss said, "Hey, somebody called you from Fukuoka.

Fukuoka had a large U.S. military hospital. My boss said the person who called for me said his name was Seitelbach. My captain knew Leo's name was Seitelbach. He asked if I wanted to go see him. When I said, "of course." the captain made arrangements for me to go to the Army hospital in Kokura, which was right next to Fukuoka. When I got to the station, the train was just about to leave so I jumped on it. I should have waited. That turned out to be the local train! But who would think of such things? It took forever and ever. It's not that far from Sasebo to Fukuoka, but the local train stopped at every station. I was going out of my mind. So, anyway, I finally got there. My captain had told me to go to the Rail Transport Office. He said, "I'll contact them. Just wait there. Then, you can talk to your boyfriend." I got there just as they were making an announcement. "Mrs. Seitelbach, come to the Rail Transport Office." (Officially, we were not married at that time, but when my captain called the office, he pretended we were married. Otherwise, I would not have been able to use American military transportation.) There was a nice old sergeant there. He said, "Are you Mrs. Seitelbach?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm sorry, but you just missed him. They took him to the general hospital in Yokohama and they will send him home."

MA: You just missed him?

AS: Yes, so I cried again. I just came apart. I sat there and I didn't know where to put myself. This sergeant was so sweet. He told me not to cry and he'd make sure I got on the next train

back to Sasebo. The next train did not leave for four hours so he offered me some tea. I didn't want anything...I was numb. I would never see Leo again. I had no way of finding him. In the meantime, lots of trains came into the platform--all hospital trains, with all wounded soldiers--sick soldiers. Then, one train stopped and there was a commotion because they had to take all the patients to the hospital. I was looking for Leo, but since they told me that I had already missed him, I couldn't think anymore. Suddenly, somebody knocked on the Rail Transport Office window. I looked. Leo was there. He was standing right outside of the door! Can you imagine? I ran out there and said, "They told me you had left. How come you came back?" He said, "I was on the hospital train. Then, they must have called from the office to say that there were more soldiers to be picked up. So, we came back to pick up more soldiers. Wasn't that something? It's like a miracle. It was meant to be. That's what happened. The train took him to Yokohama where he was to be sent home to America. He said to me then, "I don't care what I do. I will come back and marry you. Will you wait?" I said, "Yes, I will wait." Maybe we will not be able to get married now, but no matter how many years it takes, we are going to get married.

The next time that I saw Leo was when he volunteered for combat duty in Korea.

Before shipping out of New York, he called me to say that the troop transport ship would be stopping at the naval base in Yokosuka, Japan. When the ship arrived, the American soldiers were dropped off overnight before being shipped to Korea. So we were able to meet at a friend's house before he had to report back to the ship.

MA: When you were working in the Army office and you were hearing news, did it come from Army officers talking?

AS: About what?

MA: The Korean War. How did you hear the news about what was happening in the Korean War?

AS: I heard it from the soldiers coming back from battle. I worked in headquarters, so I could see the soldiers returning. They looked thin and undernourished.

MA: When you married your husband were there any issues?

LI: Was it difficult?

MA: Yes, was it difficult to get married to your husband, being Japanese?

AS: I handled all Army dependents' affairs. I was now an expert at it, even though it took a long time. There were very many documents requested by the Army. They had to investigate my personal history--if I was a communist or a spy or if any of my family members were war criminals. They really investigated me. They even contacted the Japanese police. I knew exactly what papers to fill out--a lot of necessary information. Finally, I got everything ready except my clearance from the Japanese police. By that time, I had moved to a different city to get a better job with headquarters. I worked for the commander of Camp Nara. It's between

Tokyo and Osaka, in the center of Japan. I had made a lot of connections with officers and they knew what I was capable of doing. One of the officers, Major Roig, had been appointed adjutant of Camp Nara. He was the father of my close friend, Bernadette.

LI: Oh.

AS: He really trained me. He was a very strict training master. It's too involved, but he met Leo. He promised Leo he would take care of me, and if we wanted to get married he would help. By this time, Leo had completed his tour of duty and had gone back to New York. So, Major Roig said, "I will take Akiko under my care." He was the personnel officer, and he could do everything. I knew that, so we worked well together. It wasn't that much work except for clearance from the Japanese police. This is funny. I went to the Japanese police station. I said, "Good afternoon." A detective, a middle aged man, looked up at me and said, "What do you want?" I said, "I want a report of investigation."

He said, "What kind of a report of investigation?"

"Personal history."

He asked me what the name was of the person I wanted investigated.

I said, "Akiko Mizuta is the name."

He said, "What did she do?"

I said, "Nothing."

He said, "Then, why are you investigating her?"

I said, "I am Akiko Mizuta. I want to marry an American soldier and you are supposed to give me my background clearance confirming that I'm not a spy or I'm not a prostitute. I don't have any criminal record."

Then, he said, "Sit here." He asked me why I wanted to marry an American and what did my parents say? Of course, I hadn't told my parents. My mother was dead. My father would kill me if he knew. He was surprised when I told him my father knew. I told him he could check with my father, if he wanted to. I wrote my dad a letter when I returned home: "I'm getting a very important job with the American Army and the Japanese police need to do a personal investigation." I knew he wouldn't mind. He liked my salary. Anyway, that's what happened--the detective really tried to talk me out of it. He asked me to think it over. I told him I would, but in the meantime, please give me the paper. Of course, I will think it over. We got married in Kobe, on January 23rd, in a civil ceremony at the American Embassy when my husband came back to Japan on rest and rehabilitation leave. When we went to the American Embassy to get married, the American Counselor wouldn't even let me come into his office. He said, "You wait outside." I'm nobody. I'm a defeated country's poor woman. He was not about to talk to me, but anyway, I got married.

MA: Did you have a formal ceremony?

AS: Yes, but that was in March. A friend of Leo, an Army Baptist chaplain came in to perform the religious marriage ceremony on March 20, 1953.

LI: Yes.

AS: My husband was Jewish and the chaplain was Baptist. Even so, Leo thought I would like a Christian wedding. Leo instructed the chaplain to "make it very short." So, we got married anyway, very short.

MA: That was 1952?

AS: '53.

MA: Were there any other Japanese women or men who worked with you in the Army job?

AS: Lots of them. One of the ladies was a daughter of a Rear Admiral.

LI: Who?

AS: A Japanese Rear Admiral. He was considered a war criminal and could not get a job. She came to work in the headquarters in the personnel section. We became very good friends. Then, she met somebody, an American. After I came to America, he came to see me. He said he wanted to marry my friend, Kazuko, and wanted to know what I thought. I said, "Well, congratulations, but you know this life gets a little bit complicated and hard." After they were married, he became the top editor of Playboy magazine. I knew a lot of other people who worked in Camp Nara, but I wasn't that close to them. I stayed in Camp Nara for a while with Bernie's father and mother. At that time, the American Occupation Army provided housing for commissioned officers and their families. Major Roig and his family lived in a mansion belonging to the owner of one of the largest Japanese soap companies. It was his summer home in Nara and it was confiscated to give it to Bernie's father. I lived in their beautiful tea room.

MA: You mentioned in your book that when you were working with the Army you saw the emperor.

AS: Emperor?

MA: Yes.

AS: Yes. He came to Sasebo and his escort followed far behind him--as was the tradition. Since it's the Army headquarters, no Japanese were around. My boss, Capt. Ford said, "Hey, the emperor's coming. Why don't you go say hello?" I told him that I didn't think he would want to say hello to me. He stated that the emperor is not a god, he's a human, and I should at least go over and greet him. So, I ran out as he came by. I raised my hands above my head in a salute

and said, "*Tennoheika Bonzai*." [Long live His Majesty the Emperor] He was startled because there was nobody there except me. He ignored me and walked away. So, it's okay. I felt sorry that he had to be greeted like that, but I wanted him to know that at least one Japanese person saw him walking. That's what happened. It must have been awfully hard for him to adjust.

LI: Right.

MA: So, in 1953 you moved to America?

AS: Yes.

MA: Maybe talk about coming to America, the trip over to America.

AS: After we got married, Leo was shipped back to Korea. His parents and sisters found out he had married a Japanese girl. So, at first, they were upset. Leo's family put in a request to the United States Army stating that Leo's father was dying of cancer and he needed to come home on emergency leave, because he was the only son. So, they sent him home. I was happy he got out of the Korean War.

I came to America by myself. When I got here, Leo's family was very good to me. From the moment his mother saw me, she treated me like her own daughter. Although, she had two daughters, she treated me like a third daughter.

When she made a meal, she packed up the leftovers, so we could take them to the Army Base in Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn where we were living.

MA: So, you made the trip by yourself?

AS: Yes. I won't go into the details. It was okay.

LI: Right.

AS: Since I was traveling alone on a military transport ship, I was put in a cabin with two other Japanese wives, whose husbands were not officers. One wife was a graduate of a very prestigious college. She was pregnant and she was sick throughout the whole trip. The other girl was a country girl whose husband was only a private in the Army. She was funny and so cute. She was high spirited and had guts, but she was fighting with her husband all the time. He had to stay below deck but would try to sneak into our cabin. One time, he was caught and told it's against the rules. He was given one warning; if he got caught again he would be put in jail. His wife didn't understand why he could not come to see her and when he tried to explain it to her, she got angry.

MA: What was it like for you to leave Japan and come to America? Were you excited? Were you anxious?

AS: I was not excited. I was anxious.

MA: Do you remember how long your trip was?

AS: The trip was about a week. In the daytime, I used to go upstairs and play Canasta with all the other officers' wives. I was very good at Canasta so they liked to play with me. So, I played Canasta for seven days.

MA: Did you get seasick at all?

AS: I was seasick a little, but it wasn't too bad.

MA: When you got to America, where did you land?

AS: I arrived at Seattle, Washington. When I got there, I was met by Leo's Army friend, George and his wife, who lived there. They came to the ship to get me.

I stayed just overnight in Seattle, because Leo wanted me to come to New York as quickly as possible. They put me on a plane and in the meantime, they contacted him, so that he would meet me at Kennedy Airport, Idlewild, as they used to call it.

LI: Right.

AS: Somebody sitting next to me on the plane tried to tell me all kinds of stories. "What are you going to do if your husband doesn't show up? If he doesn't show up, I will take you home. My mom would love you." So, when we got to Idlewild, of course Leo was there. My trip companion asked, "Do you see him?" I said, "Yes, thank you. I will tell him you were very kind." So, all ended well.

MA: Do you want to take a break? We have been going for over an hour?

LI: Do you want to stop?

AS: How about some tea?

MA: Okay, if you want to take a break first, then we can keep going.

AS: Whatever you want to do. How much more do you have?

MA: We pretty much have to go through your time in America. Maybe we can talk a little about Puerto Rico, when you were there.

AS: Puerto Rico?

MA: Yes.

AS: Oh, that was wonderful. We better eat something.

MA: Let me just pause.

AS: Would you like coffee?

[TAPE PAUSED]

AS: It's good, isn't it? Have some.

MA: I will have some.

AS: Good for you.

MA: We are back on and we just talked about coming to America. So, what was it like living in America? Was it difficult getting used to the culture here?

AS: It wasn't too strange since I worked for the American Army many years before I came here. All the time I worked for the Army, I hardly associated with a lot of Japanese people. I was with Americans most of the time. It wasn't strange at all.

MA: What were your first impressions of America? What did you think?

AS: Big. Yes. I looked down from the airplane and saw all sorts of things. I said, "Oh, my god, no wonder we lost." Can't win; look at this place, hours and hours of flying. In those days it's not a jet. That was good. That was fine.

MA: At this time was your husband still in the United States or was he assigned overseas?

AS: The first time I came, he was stationed in Brooklyn, New York, in Fort Hamilton. Have you heard of Fort Hamilton? He was in charge of Army dependent travel to Europe.

One day, Leo brought home a Japanese woman and a little boy about five years old. They were hungry, so I said I would feed them. Her husband was already in Europe and she would be traveling alone with her son. I had already made a pot of rice. The little boy opened the lid and he wanted to eat. I don't think they spoke English, but she said in Japanese, "I'm so sorry for my son. He's not behaving." I said, "It's okay. Eat all you want, whatever I have. It's okay."

Did I ever mention the first job I got in America?

My first job was with the Fuji Bank, Ltd. in Manhattan. They had just opened it. They hired me as a receptionist. I had a wonderful time. I just sat there. It was just after the war, so Fuji Bank in Japan only sent a couple of top executives to establish the bank on Wall Street.

The place was beautifully furnished. I asked, "What am I supposed to do? Just sit here?" They said, "We will be having top executives from different companies here to establish business relations in New York; therefore, treat them with respect." One of my responsibilities was to escort the families of the senior executives to the Metropolitan Opera House, Carnegie Hall and other events in New York since they did not speak English. My husband asked, "What kind of a job is that?" I said, "A wonderful job."

MA: What was it like living in America, but being an Army wife? What was that like for you?

AS: How was it to be an Army officer's wife?

LI: Right.

MA: Yes.

AS: Well, some American officers and their wives did not like the idea of a Japanese girl as an American Army officer's wife. The first time I attended the officer's wives' luncheon, not a person had spoken to me. I had somehow expected such treatment; therefore it did not hurt me. I can cope with almost anything. But my neighbors were very nice. We had a colonel living next to us. The house we lived in, in Fort Hamilton, was built by Robert E. Lee. The house, at that time, was renovated to make three apartments.

MA: So, then you went to Puerto Rico? When was that?

AS: I worked for two years at Fuji Bank. But sure enough, after two years, Leo received orders to go overseas. He had the choice of going to Panama or Puerto Rico. At that time, Leo was already a personnel officer and permitted to make his

own choice. He didn't like Panama, so he asked if I would go with him if he chose to go to Puerto Rico. So, we went to Puerto Rico in 1955. At first it was horrible, because the housing was not ready. I had to wait in temporary housing for about a month-and-a-half. I've never been to jail, but it must be like the temporary housing in Puerto Rico. It's hot, humid, cockroaches and other bugs, lizards, snakes and everything else you can think of. Spiders were big, lizards about that high. (Akiko demonstrates). Anyway, I'm talking too much.

MA: That is fine. How did you spend the time in Puerto Rico? What were some of the things you did in Puerto Rico?

AS: I wanted to get a job, but I did not speak Spanish. Bernie's parents were also stationed in Puerto Rico. Bernie's mom, Eunice, said she had to find me a job, because I'd go out of my mind. You have to speak Spanish in most of the jobs. Eunice was working as a secretary to Martha Sleeper, the former movie star. You got the picture there. (Akiko shows picture.) She played the mother of a student in Bing Crosby's "Bells of St. Mary." Martha Sleeper was a designer and had a dress shop. She was looking for a dress shop manager and since I could talk to the customers because they all spoke English, I got the job. Most of them were wealthy cruise ship passengers. Some of them were movie stars or very rich ladies from New York. They came to

Martha Sleeper's shop because she was well known at that time. When she hired me as store manager, she told me to wear her creations in the shop. In that way, a customer could see how her clothes can be worn. It was sort of a show. I learned all about clothing and fashion. One day a man came in and greeted me in Japanese. I found out that he was William Jordan Verbeck, the American commanding General of the Antilles. I think he was raised in Japan. He spoke, wrote and read Japanese fluently, much better than some Japanese. He had a wonderful story to tell. He was fighting against the Japanese in the Second World War. The Japanese surrounded him and his troops on one of the islands in the South Pacific. He said they chased him down to the valley, with all the Japanese soldiers surrounding them on the top of the mountain. So, General Verbeck, who was a colonel then, believed that if the Japanese General was a true samurai, he would give them a fair chance. In the night, all the Japanese surrounding them had fires burning, but he and his men were in total darkness. He stepped out and started singing the Japanese National Anthem!

MA: The Japanese National Anthem?

AS: Right, Kimigayo. You know the Japanese National Anthem? Well, General Verbeck started singing. The Japanese general was surprised and bewildered as to who could be singing his National Anthem. General Verbeck identified himself as the commander of the American troops that were surrounded. He asked the Japanese general if he could give them a chance to climb up to one of the roads and fight under normal circumstances. The Japanese general agreed to let the American troops come up to the plateau to have a fair fight. However, I think the Americans lost that fight because they ran away. The Japanese general was still alive at the end of the war and he was considered a war criminal. After the war, Verbeck looked for this general. He knew the general was unable to get a job because he was a war criminal, but he wanted to see him.

MA: Wow.

AS: The military police wanted to escort Verbeck to the Japanese general's house. General Verbeck agreed to a military escort, but he would walk the last couple of streets by himself. The Japanese general still writes to him. General Verbeck showed me a letter. Even for me it was hard to read, because it was written in a very old fashioned Japanese way of writing. I really admired him. He was a true samurai!

LI: Wow.

MA: That was a great story. Is there anything else you would like to talk about during your time in Puerto Rico?

AS: At one time, I was asked to entertain the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Taylor, and his escort at Casa Rosa, General Verbeck's quarters. General Verbeck said to me, "Could you prepare sukiyaki for them?" I said, "Sukiyaki, yes, but I cannot slice all that meat and all those other things." He said, "Oh, I'll get my cook to do all that. You just have to show them how to make it." So, I did. We had a wonderful time.

MA: Was your husband surprised?

AS: Oh, yes. My husband and I were invited to spend the night in a guest room in General Verbeck's house. The general teased me like a little daughter. He said, "You don't mind if Ponce de Leon's ghost walks around in the night, do you? If you hear any chains rattling, that's the ghost, so don't worry about it."

AS: I told Leo not to leave me alone. Leo never believed in ghosts, and he took that opportunity to scare me during the night, by saying, "Oh, I hear something."

MA: How long were you in Puerto Rico?

AS: I was there three years. It's quite a long time.

MA: Did you learn any Spanish while you were there?

AS: No, I didn't.

MA: I'll pause this.

[TAPE PAUSED]

MA: You can continue. We were just talking about the end of your time in Puerto Rico when you visited the home of General Verbeck. Where did you go after Puerto Rico?

AS: We came back to America in 1958, because Leo was stationed on Staten Island, and I went to work for Kanebo USA, Inc. In 1960, Leo received orders to ship out to Germany for three years. That was at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. My husband was assigned to a combat division, Third Armored Division.

MA: What were some of the things you did in Germany when you were there?

AS: What did I do in Germany? I worked in the Army library, since I could speak English. The librarian, Mary Ann, was a wonderful boss and is still my friend. There was one interesting incident while working at the library. A young Army soldier, I don't know whether he was angry or not, but he chose that time to throw his machete at the library office window. I was far enough away from the window that it didn't reach me. It sounded like a bomb through a big window. Some people are crazy. That's about it.

MA: You said your husband was in a combat unit in Germany. Were you worried that in 1962 or 1963, that he might have to fight?

AS: Yes, remember, it was at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Army commander told the military wives that the Russian troops were at the border of Germany. Also, Russian naval vessels were headed toward Germany. If negotiations fell through, we would be at war. The Russians would then invade Germany. Our husbands were soldiers and, they would have to fight

on the front line. The Army commander told all military dependents stationed there that since spouses would be ordered to the front line, it was our responsibility to evacuate to Marseilles, France. We would be given a map so we could begin driving from where we were. There would be a naval vessel there to transport us back to the United States.

AS: Listening to that speech, I thought we would never make it with women and children in cars by ourselves. The German people were still poor from the war and they didn't like us that much. I was afraid someone might attack us for our money. My friend, Joan, who was pregnant and due to have her first baby at any moment, asked if I would drive with her. I told her I would help her if the baby came, and I would read up on it! All you have to do is pull the baby out and cut the cord. I was so relieved when we were told that the Russians had turned around and gone back, so we did not have to leave Germany. The main thing was I really didn't know how to deliver a baby. She had the baby the day or two afterwards. She was only about twenty-four and I was forty. That was too much excitement!

MA: Did your husband tell you anything about that time or was he not allowed to tell you anything?

AS: He was on maneuvers at the Russian border most of the three years we were there.

MA: I will pause.

[TAPE PAUSED]

MA: Okay we are on.

MA: What year did you come back from Germany to the United States?

AS: I was there three years.

MA: You were there three years so it must have been '63.

AS: '63, yes, I can't remember exactly.

MA: Yes, that is okay. So, you were working for Kanebo USA. When you came back you were still working for them?

AS: Yes, I came back to New York and I lived in Brooklyn. That was a very nice, beautiful, little apartment.

MA: What were some of the jobs you did?

AS: Same old job with Kanebo USA, Inc. Kanebo is a big company. However, they went bankrupt a few years ago when management was caught with tax evasion or something. Thank god I had retired. Through Kanebo I met so many good, interesting people who taught me valuable and necessary knowledge about life and business.

MA: You said you came to this community thirty-five years ago.

AS: Yes. We moved to Rossmoor.

MA: How have you seen the community change?

AS: I came here about thirty-five years ago. I was living in New York and still working. I worked until I was about seventy-five. I commuted to New York every day, but I enjoyed it. When I first came here the area was almost all white Anglo-Saxon. I joined the church right away. When I became a deacon, I was introduced to all the members of the church. However, some of the members were

home-bound. Therefore, I made a visit to their home. I was well received by all of the members, except one. She responded with a simple remark, "Nowadays they let anybody in." Then, her daughter said, "I'm sorry." Some people are like that. It's okay. It didn't bother me. I met really good people and learned more about the Christian religion and its doctrine.

When my husband got very ill, I had to stay home, so I retired. After seventy-five years of working, I thought I would be bored staying at home. However, I really enjoyed doing a lot of things. I played bridge. I also played golf, but very badly. Leo liked to golf so I tried to learn, but I had trouble hitting the ball.

MA: When did you convert to Christianity?

AS: The year I came here, 1953. Nagasaki is the oldest Christian city in Japan. The Catholic churches are national treasures. So, Christians are not that unfamiliar to me. I was raised in a Buddhist family, and of course people sort of look at Christians strangely. Remember, my sister, after high school, went to the Christian college run by Americans; I think they were Methodists. She majored in music. I used to go to their Open House where they performed all the Bible stories in English.

MA: Since you came to America, have you ever been back to Nagasaki?

AS: I went home every chance I got while working for Kanebo.

At first, I didn't have money to go back to Nagasaki. It cost too much. After twelve years, when I got my job with Kanebo, I had enough money to go home to visit. On Leo's and my twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, the company prepared our anniversary party at their headquarters in Osaka, Japan.

LI: Oh, wow.

AS: Many of the company executives, who were all male, came to the party. Wives are not usually invited to such events. There was one woman, a designer from Christian Dior, because Kanebo was a licensee of Christian Dior. She and I were the only women present.

MA: What was it like coming back to Nagasaki?

AS: Oh, I was so homesick. First time after twelve years, when I went back, I wanted to kiss the ground. At that time, my sister and my brother were still alive. Everybody was there, thank god, and that was the last time I saw my brother. He was my niece's father; my niece is still there. She came here to attend Wesleyan College. Anyway, when I went back the first time, my niece was just a little kid. When I returned to America, I was so homesick. I wanted to go back to Japan, but at that time it was too far away and too expensive. But, I did get a chance to go back a few times on company business. I used to visit for only ten days to two weeks at a time.

MA: How did the city change for you?

AS: Oh, it changed. The first time I went there it was still like I had remembered. Then, the next couple of times it gradually changed because the people were changing. When I was growing up, children were very respectful of their elders, but gradually kids became very "modern." They don't know how to greet people. If you ask them question, they look at you blankly. They didn't say anything. Now there is more crime committed compared to when I lived there. Gradually, I didn't enjoy the trip as much as I used to. The last time I went back was in 1995. My husband came with me. We went back together a couple of times before, because he loved going to Japan. However, the last time we went, I said, "I'm homesick for New York; let's go home. I don't like it here anymore." So, we came home. I like it here. As crazy as it is, I like it here.

MA: What attracted you to come to Rossmoor? Why did you move here?

AS: I was looking for a permanent place to live. We rented a house in Brooklyn. I knew eventually I needed a house. I might as well get some place nice that I like. I didn't think that commuting was that horrible, but it's okay. We were driving around and my brother-in-law accompanied us. He's wonderful about anything with carpentry or housing and can fix anything and everything. He drove us around and we went to all different places. He said Rossmoor had the best built housing. After seeing several communities, he said that the Rossmoor houses were built better, so we bought a house in Rossmoor. I've been here thirty-five years and it's still standing. Lots of other people from other communities are having problems.

MA: You said you were involved with the Church. What kind of activities did you do with the Church?

AS: I was appointed a deacon.

MA: I have one last question. We are coming to the end here. I wanted to ask you about some of the festivals that you took part in, in Japan.

AS: Festivals? There are so many.

MA: Just any ones that stick out for you in your memory.

AS: One of the largest festivals we have is Kunchi. It is a three day festival for Nagasaki's guardian god of Shintoism. There are seventy-three stone steps to climb up to the shrine at the top of the hill. I used to climb it every day during the war to say please let us win, but we didn't. Anyway, that is a huge holiday and Nagasaki is a very metropolitan city. It's just one hop from China. We have lots of Chinese cultures like the dragon dance. When I was a kid, my mom dressed me up and took me to see all the activities. The dragon dance is the most famous and most popular one, but the dragon is very scary looking. It was a huge thing, but my mom sort of pushed me to the front. They're supposed to do the dragon dance in the precinct of the shrine, a certain area. It's not very big. They have to walk around and around. We just have to stand there and watch. Once, when the dragon was coming around, and he was right in front of me, I got scared and I cried when I saw his large open mouth and teeth. I remember my mother said, "Don't cry. It is not going to hurt you." That's what I remember. They had all kinds of dancing and I enjoyed it, but that dragon I could do without.

MA: Is there something we did not talk about? Is there something you wanted to end with? You have that opportunity now before we finish the interview.

LI: Is there anything else?

MA: About anything?

AS: No, there are so many things. I couldn't tell you everything. If there's anything else you need, you can send me an email or you can come over. If you think of something else to ask me anytime.

MA: Okay, so I will conclude the interview.

AS: Is that okay?

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Transcribed By Nina Malagi
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