

Yoshiki Onoyama was born on August 22, 1906 in Iwakuni City, Japan. He was the eldest of five children to Ryushin and Sono Onoyama. Yoshiki came from a long line of Buddhist ministers, so when he graduated from Kyoto University, it was understood that he would eventually run the family temple in Iwakuni once his father retired. However, he never had the chance to lead his family temple. The outbreak of World War II disrupted the course of many Japanese “issei” and “nisei” lives, including the path that had been mapped out for Yoshiki Onoyama for generations.

In 1932, Yoshiki married Fumiko Yasumi. Just one year into their marriage, he received notice that the Sacramento, California Buddhist Church was in need of a minister. Sacramento County was home to the second largest number of Japanese immigrants at over 8,100 (“Five Views”). Yoshiki and Fumiko decided to move to Sacramento in 1933 to start their new life in the United States and lay the foundation for the bridge that brought together their cultural influences from their upbringing in Japan.

Adjusting to a new life in a foreign country with great cultural differences while speaking very little English, was a challenge. Additionally, they were faced with the difficult task of raising two young children, Yoshihisa, born in 1935, and Atsuko, born in 1938, in an unfamiliar country.

Just four years after Atsuko was born, World War II began. Yoshiki’s family was transferred to Poston, Arizona internment camp where they began their three-year incarceration that affected over 120,000 Japanese “issei” and Japanese American “nisei” (“Japanese Internment”). While imprisoned in Poston, their third daughter, Kimiko, was born in 1942.

On February 10, 1943 a questionnaire requiring simple yes or no answers was distributed to the internees in order to separate the “loyal” from the “disloyal”. Included in this questionnaire were two controversial questions, identified as questions #27 and #28:

Question #27: Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever you are ordered?

Question #28: Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from attack from any and all by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese Emperor or any other foreign government, power or organization? (Hirasuna 20)

Those answering with a “no” to both questions were sent to the Tule Lake internment camp.

Shortly after the distribution of the questionnaire, Yoshiki’s family was transferred to Tule Lake Segregation Center known for imprisoning “disloyal” Japanese. With 18,789 internees at its peak, Tule Lake was the largest of the internment camps, the only one converted to a maximum security segregation center (Takei).

The environment in Tule Lake did not make this experience easier for the internees. The winters were wet and freezing cold while the summer temperatures often reached above 100 degrees with consistent dust storms. Because there were so many people in the internment camp, there was no privacy because the internees lived in barracks built for livestock. In addition to the overpopulation, there was a limited amount of food and resources (“Tule Lake, California”).

Although these were very tough living conditions, Yoshiki made the best of their situation. To cope with the stress, he diverted to what he knew best, being a minister. Yoshiki started one of the eight Buddhist Churches at Tule Lake. As a church leader, Yoshiki taught his

congregation how to make the best of the isolated, uncomfortable, and overcrowded living arrangements. Through his teachings, he helped others to change their attitude to a more positive outlook on their living conditions. In an article by the National Park Service, it explains how the internees attempted to keep life as normal as possible:

“Harvest festivals, dances, and baseball were common recreation activities.

Recreation buildings were converted into stores, canteens, a beauty parlor, a barber shop, judo halls, Buddhist temples, a Catholic church, and three other churches”. (Tule Lake Segregation Center)

By running one of the Buddhist temples at Tule Lake, Yoshiki was able to help provide this “normal life” environment to his fellow camp mates.

When the war ended and the internees were allowed to leave the camps, Yoshiki moved his family to Cincinnati, Ohio to be close to their only relative living in the U.S., Fumiko’s auntie. Yoshiki worked in their restaurant, which served Chinese cuisine, to make ends meet. Despite the support from their family, they were still exposed to waves of hostility as they tried to start their new life. There were very few Japanese Americans in Ohio. Yoshiki soon realized that resuming the life they had before World War II was, unfortunately, not possible especially when his children were facing racism and unfair treatment at their schools.

As they tried to reorganize their post-war life, many Japanese Americans masked their sense of loss and betrayal with the Japanese phrase *Shikata ga nai*—It can’t be helped (Frail). This is a phrase that Yoshiki used often with his own family. He believed it would allow them to move on and make sense of their unfair treatment.

Still struggling to provide a life without such hostility towards his family, Yoshiki thought it would be best to relocate his family to California where there were more Japanese

Americans. In 1950, his family moved to Sebastopol, California where he became the Buddhist minister for their historical church called, Enmanji Temple. It was from the church congregation that Yoshiki and his family finally received the support and solace needed to regain their footing.

Through his experiences during and after their internment, Yoshiki learned to be clever with the often limited resources available to him. His creativity and resourcefulness was demonstrated when the Sebastopol congregation needed to raise funds for the church.

Next to Sebastopol is the town of Petaluma, which was known as the “World’s Egg Basket” due to its thriving egg industry (Pendle). Since Sebastopol had access to so many chickens, Yoshiki figured out a way to capitalize on this by organizing a Teriyaki Chicken fundraiser at his church. This fundraiser was so successful, it started earning a reputation amongst other Buddhist churches. As the word about their Teriyaki Chicken fundraiser spread, other churches visited Sebastopol to learn more from the creator of this tasty and lucrative fundraiser.

In 1955, Yoshiki moved with his family to Lodi, California where he became the minister for their Buddhist Church and ultimately retired in 1967.

Yoshiki Onoyama, was a man of great resilience, perseverance and understanding. He was also my great grandfather. Without ever meeting him, he has influenced me in profound ways. My great grandfather always looked on the bright side of situations. This is something I strive to do especially now during a time when we all have been so isolated due to the covid pandemic. I have tried to mirror my great grandfather by looking at the bright side of this life changing experience while enjoying this special time with my family and finding opportunities to connect with friends remotely.

Like my great grandfather, I try to help people in need and stay true to what I believe. Just like Yoshiki who answered “no” to questions #27 and #28 in the loyalty questionnaire because he felt strongly about the unjust treatment of the Japanese Americans during World War II, I believe there are many who are unfairly treated today. During the recent wave of violence against African Americans, I felt it was necessary to take a stand by joining peaceful protests in my community. As my great grandfather demonstrated, you can impact loudly by sticking to your beliefs and speaking softly, yet firmly.

I have been lucky to have had the opportunity to welcome newcomers to the United States. At my high school, I am in a program which helps Japanese exchange students feel accepted when they arrive. During lunch, I invite them to join me and my friends and provide tours of the campus so they will have an easier time navigating around.

On a wider scale, I would like to set up an organization that helps immigrants learn English so they would have an easier time communicating. I personally think that language is the hardest challenge to face when entering a new country. A lot of newcomers are not fluent in English, which makes it difficult to connect with and understand American culture. Through this organization, by giving newcomers a chance to become better at English, they would then have a greater chance to enjoy their experience in the U.S.

Although I had never met my great grandfather, his beliefs were passed down through my grandfather, to my mother, and now to me. Yoshiki’s teachings of resilience; to pick up after you fall, continue to work hard and “shikata ga nai”, have taught me that when life hands you a raw deal, you don’t feel sorry for yourself. I am glad that I have this influence from my great grandfather and will continue these traits in his honor.

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