

He was born in Portland. An executive order sent him to a Japanese internment camp.

By [Casey Parks | The Oregonian/Oregon Live](#)

A few days before his 90th birthday, Henry "Shig" Sakamoto went for his regular checkup. His hearing is bad, and his back is, too. But, the doctor told Sakamoto, surviving nine decades is a feat. "When you turn 90," the doctor said, "you are invincible." Later that afternoon, he looked the word up in the dictionary. "Unconquerable," he read. "Incapable of being captured." He chuckled. Of course, 75 years ago, the federal government had tried.

Sakamoto was a sophomore at Lincoln High School when they came for him. He was 15, a boy with an impish grin and a three-inch pompadour. He and two older brothers lived in the hotel their parents ran at Southwest Main and First Avenue.

Their parents legally immigrated from Japan in the early 1900s, but Sakamoto and his brothers were born in Portland, making them U.S. citizens. He spent his days at Lincoln, studying math, agriculture and Spanish. At night, he learned Japanese at a language school down the street. He spent the rest of his time playing basketball with his brother Tom.

Portland was home to a thriving Japanese community then. More than half of the 1,680 residents of Japanese descent were born here. They owned 100 hotels and apartment complexes, 64 grocery stores and 39 laundry services. Others ran restaurants and barber shops. Nearly a dozen worked as doctors and dentists.

Then, on Dec. 7, 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

The West Coast, where 90 percent of Japanese residents lived at the time, braced for an attack on the mainland. Oregon's governor commanded all people of Japanese descent to remain in their homes. Portlanders prepared for war. Japanese men who showed up for work the next day were told they no longer had jobs. City workers canceled the licenses of many Japanese-owned businesses. FBI agents patrolled homes and arrested people who had anything Japanese. They confiscated Sakamoto's Brownie camera, leaving him unable to document the years to come. "That was a hysterical period," Sakamoto said. "All the Japanese families just started throwing away anything Japanese. It didn't matter that he had been born in Portland. Suddenly, Sakamoto realized, many Americans saw him as the enemy. Japanese residents "have not melted in the great American melting pot," a reporter for The Oregonian wrote in January 1942. "They look just like the Japanese who are killing American soldiers and sailors on the westward isles. A great many Caucasian Americans cannot or will not attempt to make a distinction. "Other Asians worried they might be mistaken for Japanese. Chinese residents began wearing buttons that said "I am Chinese Sakamoto spent the two months after Pearl Harbor unsure of his fate.

Then, on Feb. 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 giving West Coast states permission to remove residents of Japanese descent, American citizens or not. White men roamed Portland, hammering signs to telephone poles -- "instructions to all persons of JAPANESE ancestry. Officials called it an "evacuation." Japanese people, even those born in Oregon, could no longer live freely in the state. They could move inland, the signs said, or report to the Pacific International Livestock grounds for detention. "My Chinese buddies came running to me," Sakamoto said. "They said, 'Hey! You're going to jail.' Few of Portland's Japanese families had the money or connections to move. Some protested -- Portland lawyer Minoru Yasui challenged a Japanese curfew by walking into a police station and demanding to be arrested -- but most made plans to surrender. "It is part of Japanese culture to obey authority," Sakamoto said. "We're taught that from the very beginning. Obey the government, the elders, your teachers." Sakamoto's parents asked a longtime tenant to take over their hotel.

Sakamoto told his teachers he would be leaving school. Most families sold their belongings or stashed them in storage. Businesses held "evacuation sales," hocking goods at a fraction of their worth.

In early May, Japanese families began moving in alphabetical order to the livestock grounds. The Sakamoto's were due on the fourth day. They drove a rented truck to North Portland. When they arrived, Sakamoto spotted a few friends standing inside the barbed wire. He hopped out of the truck to chat. After a few minutes, he walked back toward his parents. A military guard stopped him, Sakamoto said. "He said, 'You stay here. You don't leave this compound,'" Sakamoto said. "That's when I realized, I was a prisoner," Sakamoto said. "I was in jail. And I was 15 years old."

*The livestock grounds had, for two decades, held cattle and pigs. When Roosevelt signed the executive order, officials canceled the rodeo and auctions. Crews rushed to convert the 11-acre stockyards into dormitories. Still, the grounds smelled like urine and feces when nearly 4,000 Japanese people from across Oregon moved in the first week of May. Pigeons flew indoors. Black flies covered the walls. Officials gave each family a 10-foot by 10-foot stall and Army cots. The walls were plywood and too short to reach the ceiling. The floors were dirt and manure. People covered the floors with wooden planks and the cots with bags of hay. But it didn't make the stalls a home. "They took our life away from us," Sakamoto said.

Sakamoto spent the summer there. Then, in late August, military officials announced trains would ferry the Japanese away. Curtains covered the train's windows as they traveled east. That way, Sakamoto said, Japanese people couldn't see out -- "and those on the outside could not see in." When they arrived in rural Idaho, Sakamoto surveyed the desert. The barracks and the sagebrush were the same shade of grey. "There was no green," he said. "You could see the dust coming from a mile away. The government called Minidoka a "relocation center." Sakamoto calls it a concentration camp. Barbed wire encircled it. Guards stood posted in towers, their guns pointed down to the yards.

Sakamoto was identified by numbers -- His family was No. 15032. His home was Block 32, barrack 9, room C. The walls were covered with tarpaper but had no insulation. Each family got a small stove and cots. The rooms didn't have running water, so Sakamoto had to walk across the camp to take a shower or use the bathroom. "It was very dirty and very uncomfortable," Sakamoto said. Over time, Japanese Americans turned the barren camp into a town. They built post offices and fire stations. They organized baseball teams and tournaments.

Sakamoto started school again inside the camp. He helped deliver The Minidoka Irrigator, a newspaper internees created. He earned \$8 a month, enough to pay for ice cream and small incidentals that reminded him he was human. Every Saturday night, teenagers blasted the radio, and Sakamoto swayed and swing danced to Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman. For a few hours, at least, he felt like a regular teenager. A year after moving to Minidoka, he lost the boy he considered his "closest playmate."

Sakamoto's brother Tom contracted meningitis, an infection that causes inflammation around the brain and spinal cord. Minidoka had hospitals, but the medical care was substandard, Sakamoto said. "He slowly deteriorated," Sakamoto said. "His last months were pretty miserable." Tom never saw freedom again. In 1943, he died inside the camp. He was 18. The next few years were a blur of bad conditions. Dust in the summer, thick slicks of mud in the winter. Dinner was often mutton, a cheap and tough cut of lamb. Armed guards kept a close watch. "If you're put under guard and lock and key, it's a difficult thing to like," Sakamoto said. "You don't like being subjugated." In 1944, Sakamoto graduated from high school. He could stay in the camp and work for \$19 a month. Or he could try to leave.

As World War II dragged on, Sakamoto knew some Japanese earned work and education passes to leave the detention facilities. A friend insisted he apply to college. The friend had connections to a college in Ohio, so he wrote letters on Sakamoto's behalf. A few months later, the acceptance letter arrived at Minidoka. Sakamoto was free. His parents walked him to the barbed wire. He waved goodbye and then caught a bus to the train station. When he stepped off in Ohio, his luggage still carried dust from the camp. Sakamoto spent two years studying at Ohio Wesleyan University. He worked as a dishwasher and joined a band singing the songs he had loved back in camp. Minidoka closed in 1945.

The Japanese who returned to Portland found little waiting for them. Chinese business owners had taken over Japantown. Thieves had cleaned out the storage units. Restaurants posted signs saying "Slap the Jap" or "No Japs allowed." Sakamoto didn't come home immediately. In 1946, he was drafted into the Army and moved to Fort Lewis. He stopped singing after Ohio. In time, he forgot the Japanese he had learned as a boy. After his military stint, he earned a business degree at the University of Oregon. When he went looking for a career, he decided he couldn't be angry at the government. What would it accomplish? He took a job with the United States Department of Agriculture.

He tried not to think about the internment, even as discrimination persisted. In the early 1950s, he married a Chinese woman. They applied for apartments, but landlords turned them away. "The owner objects to you people," one manager told them. "We just took it and went on," his wife, Lolita Sakamoto, said. "By then, we had gotten used to what happens."

They found a house in Southeast Portland and raised three children. Sakamoto kept photos and maps of Minidoka hidden away. He never told his kids about the years he spent behind barbed wire. "I knew something happened," his oldest son, Scott Sakamoto, said. "Every time I'd ask for an explanation, he would try to sweep it under the rug. Didn't want to talk about it. He'd turn the other cheek." Then, in February 1979, Sakamoto told Scott he wanted him to attend an event at the Portland Expo Center, the livestock grounds where he had first been detained. Portland was holding its first Day of Remembrance, and Sakamoto planned to share his experience. "It was a story that needed to be told," Sakamoto said. "Who better to tell it than an inmate?"

Government officials eventually apologized. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill that gave each internment survivor \$20,000. The money, Sakamoto said, didn't repay what he lost -- a brother and a few years of his life. Sakamoto and others used some of their money to create a memorial. He became president of the Oregon Nikkei Endowment and helped create the Japanese American Historical Plaza in Tom McCall Waterfront Park. A decade ago, a group of Japanese musicians asked Sakamoto to help create an unusual tribute -- a band. He was 80 years old when he became the lead singer of the Minidoka Swing Band. The group plays songs from the 1940s, the big band standards they danced to in the camp. The music, Sakamoto said, reminds people of what happened to the Japanese.

There have been times, Sakamoto said, when he worried it could happen again. After 9/11, people depicted Muslims the same way they once had Japanese people -- as threats. At his oldest son's prodding, Sakamoto visited Muslim leaders to share his story and offer his help fighting any discrimination they might experience. Sakamoto said he thought people had stopped looking at Muslims as threats. Then, late last year, then President-elect Donald Trump said he would consider creating a Muslim registry. The week Sakamoto turned 90, Trump signed an executive order temporarily banning travelers from seven Muslim countries. Protesters filled airports across the country.

Sakamoto couldn't help but notice the parallels. It was a president's executive order that sent him to Minidoka. "Democracy can be overridden so easily," he said. "If you hire the right writers, you can change political opinion. They painted Japanese people as dangerous. Then they said, 'These people are a threat to you, so we better put them away.'"

At his birthday party, Sakamoto told people what the doctor had said. "I'm invincible now," he said. Inside Tony Starlight's Show Room, family members told stories about the man they called Uncle Shig. Sakamoto posed for pictures and teased his guests. He had survived long enough, he said, to eat a big slice of cake with a second glass of champagne. He had built a good life. He retired from the department of agriculture and drew a decent pension. He had grandchildren who had inherited his spunky sense of humor. And, from time to time, he still sang -- always the songs he heard in Minidoka. As the party wound down, Tony Starlight asked Sakamoto to join him for a duet. "There's a lot of difficult times in the world right now," Starlight said. "But I'm choosing to focus on times like this when I look around and see smiling, happy faces. Sometimes when you think about what other people around the world have and don't have, you can feel a little ashamed that you don't appreciate these moments. That's what this song is about." Starlight began to sing "What a Wonderful World." He held the mic out to Sakamoto. "I don't know this song," Sakamoto said, letting Starlight finish. Then, the invincible Shig Sakamoto said he'd sing an old jazz standard. He stood up and bopped in a 90-year-old way.

"All of Me," he sang. "Why not take all of me?" As if anyone ever could.

On your own piece of paper answer the following questions. Each question should be restated in the answer that will be in the form of a well-developed paragraph.

- 1. In a paragraph paraphrase this reading.**
- 2. Describe the events (world and local) that led to the main character being sent to an internment camp.**
- 3. Compare and contrast the living conditions present in the camps. Are they better or worse than where you live and why?**
- 4. What was the response of Mr. Sakamoto to the racism he had to deal with when he returned to Oregon after the war? Do you agree with the way he handled the situation? Or should he have done something different and why?**
- 5. Mr. Sakamoto said "I'm invincible now", what made him invincible?**