

MY LIFE STORY

Part One

Rev. Shindo Nishiyama

According to my family history, our family temple was established by a distant ancestor who was a samurai of low rank from the Tachibana Clan. The Clan's headquarters is now Yanagawa City in Fukuoka. The job of this low-ranking samurai was to collect taxes from farmers and fishermen. However, he abandoned his samurai status and was ordained as a Zen priest at the end of Edo Era.

Just imagine, if my Nishiyama ancestor continued to serve as samurai, I would not be a minister today. Instead, I may have become Shogun! Anyway, I truly appreciate the first person in my family who decided to encounter Buddhism. I am a person of the Buddha Dharma because of him.

I was born in Fukuoka, Japan, in 1962, one of the five children to my parents, Rev. Tenshin Nishiyama, Resident Minister and Head of Shirasagi Preschool, and Sumie Nishiyama, Preschool Director.

My father was drafted by the Nippon Imperial Army and sent to a Kagoshima Regiment in Kyushu in 1943. He was almost sent to Okinawa in January 1945. However, he did not go because of the shortage of cargo ships to carry troops to Okinawa. Most of the ships were lost to US submarines and air attacks. His regiment remained at the Kagoshima Army base until the war ended.

My father told me that most of the higher-ranking officers disappeared after August 15, 1945. There were only about 200 lower-ranking soldiers left. My

father was the only person left who had the authority to order the soldiers to disband and go home. He opened the warehouse that stored supplies for officers and gave it all to the soldiers to take back home. He told me that when the soldiers saw the supplies they were surprised because there were so many extravagant items, such as oil, sugar, salt, white rice, miso, cookies, canned meat, sake, tobacco, whisky, and other luxury goods! The lower-ranking soldiers had only poor-quality food and no luxury goods on the base. They were upset that higher-ranking officers kept the luxury goods to themselves! After my father ordered the dismissal of all the soldiers, he burned documents and destroyed the equipment in the communication rooms. Then he left for his home in Fukuoka.

There was no working transportation system due to air raids, so everyone returned him by walking. He remembered clearly that his parents welcomed him with tears and were overjoyed with the omiyage (military food) he brought for them. My father was around 25 years old at that time.

He married Sumie after WW II in 1946 and opened the temple for war orphans. Many children lost their families due to two major air raids in my hometown of Omuta City in 1945. The orphans had no place to stay and no food to survive. The children fled to the countryside where my family's temple was located. My mother described some of the orphans who died on the riverside or in ditches between rice fields or on the side of the road. She told me that the smell of death was strong, especially in the summertime. Because of these awful conditions, my parents decided to open the temple to save the lives of the children.

My father asked temple members to donate food and clothes for the children. Somehow, the children were saved, and they recovered from illnesses resulting

from malnutrition. After 1950, my parents committed themselves to open a childcare center, which later became Shirasagi Preschool. It was licensed by the local government and continues to the present day. The first school building used materials from a public school that was attacked by airplanes and closed after the war. My father negotiated with the government to use the lumber that was not damaged. Temple members volunteered to carry the material from the former public school to the preschool building site behind the main temple hall. My father recalled that temple members worked hard to carry the old dismantled wooden boards over a distance of five miles. Additionally, temple members leveled the hill behind the temple for the school building with great effort and difficulty due to the post war chaos in Japan.

(To be continued)