CHAPTER ONE

Between Annexation and Pearl Harbor

Edward H. Nakamura was born in Honolulu in 1922, the younger of the two sons of Ijuro and Shige Nakamura. The date of his birth was about equidistant between America’s annexation of the Hawaiian Islands and Hawaii’s unique involvement in World War II. Although the Hawaii of this long territorial period is often cosmetically portrayed as idyllic and unchanging, it was seething beneath the surface, in part because of its colonial structure, in part because of its hierarchical plantation system, and not least because Hawaii as a U.S. territory promised democracy but did not deliver it.

All of this occurred in context of the mounting international tension during the 1930s and early 1940s between the United States and Japan, the country of Nakamura’s immediate ancestors. The fact that Hawaii depended economically on its large Japanese-ancestry community, which was then nearly forty percent of the population, resulted in an ambiguous and highly complicated situation. The size and potential influence of the Japanese community was a cause for fear and mistrust. It also created an impetus for people to reach across ethnic lines, make acquaintances, and attempt to build a more inclusive society.

Ijuro and Shige Nakamura arrived in Hawaii separately, even though both were from Mie Prefecture, in the middle of the main island of Honshu, west of Tokyo. As such they differed from the majority of their fellow immigrants, who were mainly from southern Japan. Ijuro Nakamura was born in 1888 and migrated as a young man along with two sisters. His reasons for doing so are obscure; in fact, he seemed an unlikely candidate for immigration. He was from a rice-farming village, and as the eldest son he was in line to inherit a plot of family land, which was a good reason to stay in Japan. His one known contact from Mie Prefecture was a family of relatives, who also had migrated
during the time of the Hawaiian Kingdom to work at Paauilo Planta-
tion on the Island of Hawaii. Whether Ijuro worked at the Paauilo
Plantation before coming to Honolulu is not clear, but a surviving rela-
tive presumes this to have been the case.

At a time when Japanese immigrants were not allowed to become
naturalized citizens of the United States, Ijuro was one of about five
hundred Hawaii residents of Japanese ancestry who served in the
American army during the First World War. Despite his military service,
he was not granted U.S. citizenship.2

His distant cousin, Stanley Kitagawa, would remember Ijuro
as “very proper, very reserved.” A brother-in-law, Tadashi, who was
younger than Ijuro, thought of him as a “deep man,” a father figure
who quietly solved problems while other people bickered. A nephew,
James Kawashima, thought of him as “quiet, stern and formal.” His
daughter-in-law would say, “He was a real shinshi,” a gentleman.
In the few photographs that survive
of him, Ijuro stares at the camera
solemly, patient but unsmiling.

At heart, he was a city man.
For much of his life he was a waiter
at the Waikiki Tavern, which then
was one of Honolulu’s finest res-
taurants. Ijuro would leave for the
restaurant in the early morning
and return home late at night. He
worked all but one or two days
of the month. Through his job
he practiced English and the ritu-
als of a Western table. He learned
about good food and good wine,
and he imagined what it would be
like to have his own restaurant. He
brought English language newspa-
pers home every day from work. He
became George Ijuro Nakamura.

George Ijuro Nakamura, father,
brought home newspapers every day
from his job as a waiter.
Arguably, Ijuro Nakamura was in his quiet way the most important foundation stone of Edward’s life. He was self-contained, reflective, and interested in what he saw around him. His favorite conversations apparently were philosophical. He was an early convert to a Japanese religious group called Seicho-No-Ie, of which Honolulu was a significant outpost. Seicho-No-Ie borrowed from the teachings of Christianity, Buddhism, and Shintoism around a theme of “International Peace by Faith.” It proclaimed, “All religions emanate from one Universal God.” It taught the value of meditation, and its founder, a Dr. Masaharu Taniguchi, was said to have achieved Enlightenment. One of its maxims was, “The Kingdom of God is within.” Because Seicho-No-Ie was founded in 1930 in an increasingly militarized Japan, Ijuro was likely among its earliest overseas adherents.

Of his father, Edward would say, “I always thought that he understood me a lot better than my mother did. I knew that he was strict but at least he was fair.”

Shige Yamaji Nakamura

At age thirty-two, Ijuro married sixteen-year-old Shige Yamaji, who was born in a village in Mie Prefecture in 1904. Shige’s father, Tetsuzo (Edward’s maternal grandfather) had a way with women, and Shige’s mother, Moto, was the daughter of a family in distress. Her family had no sons, so the family name was in danger of dying. The solution was Moto Yamaji’s marriage to Tetsuzo, who in keeping with Japanese tradition rescued them from familial extinction by becoming Tetsuzo Yamaji.

Tetsuzo, in addition to fathering Shige and her older sister while in Japan, was said to have impregnated a fellow villager’s wife. Thereafter he departed for the Big Island of Hawaii. When most Japanese at least initially labored under the terms of a three-year contract for a plantation, Tetsuzo was able to start a dairy. Wife Moto did not get a call to join him but nonetheless migrated to Hawaii with Shige and her second daughter in tow. Tetsuzo and Moto resolved their differences sufficiently for her to settle in and produce eight more children.

During this time a man appeared on the Big Island who was said to be the aggrieved husband from the village. He killed Tetsuzo’s cattle and the dairy business as well. The Yamaji family then moved to Oahu, where young Shige married Ijuro Nakamura.

Because Shige had married at sixteen, and because Tetsuzo and Moto continued their habit of making babies, Edward Nakamura grew
up with uncles and aunts who were his own age and younger. At the birth of Moto’s last child, it was said that Shige stopped by her mother’s house and exclaimed, “No more children!”

As Tetsuzo aged, he transitioned from being an erratic father to being an erratic grandfather. His offspring recalled that he favored Edward’s brother, Henry Nakamura. When he asked Henry a question, Henry answered immediately, to Tetsuzo’s amusement. A comparable question would plunge Edward into thought, and Grandpa would then ignore him. After Tetsuzo’s sixth child finished high school, Tetsuzo again walked out on his wife, this time leaving her with three minor children. He became an eccentric figure about Honolulu, of whom young Edward must have been at least somewhat aware.

Nakamura’s Uncle Tadashi recalled that Tetsuzo would approach someone who had a plot of land—typically a Japanese woman—and talk sweetly until reaching an agreement by which he could start a truck garden. He would build a shelter and tend his crops, which he apparently grew well but marketed poorly.

With her large and amorphous family hovering around her, Shige was seemingly a bundle of contention. She was talkative, bossy, and demanding of attention. Although an easy target for criticism, she was remarkable in several ways. Despite being denied American citizenship for most of her life as a result of being born in Japan, she became fluent in both spoken and written English. Acquaintances would often remark that she spoke “perfect English.” She dressed stylishly. When she went out, she wore pearls. She sometimes went her own way at a time when most women were wholly subservient to their spouses. While Ijuro was engaged in his philosophical discussions at the Seicho-No-Ie meeting hall, Shige attended the Episcopal Church in Palolo Valley.

When Edward and his brother were small, Shige stayed at home. Otherwise she worked as a domestic in the houses of white people, as did many Japanese women at that time. With her assertiveness and her grasp of language, she tended to run things, calling in and supervising deliverymen and skilled workmen.

Her accomplishments aside, she did not evoke much fondness in Edward. Where he cited his father for fairness, “I couldn’t get that feeling with my mother.” Part of the problem was birth order. Edward’s brother Henry was older by two years, and Shige favored him. During an interview for an oral history, Nakamura told researcher Dr. Franklin Odo, “There’s a first-born syndrome in operation. Mothers never forget
their first-born children.” Odo, being Japanese, could follow by agreeing, “Especially Japanese mothers.” To which Nakamura replied, “That’s right. And I’m the one who’s different in personality, and so you begin to think that ‘Oh wow, this is it.’” The “this” and the “it” went undefined, although Nakamura added, “You’re not close.”

Edward was reserved, and Henry was sunny. Acquaintances consistently identified Henry as the outgoing one and Edward as the self-contained one. When the two boys were young, many people would become Henry’s friend before getting to know Edward. Some people would get to know both of them independently and never identify them as brothers.

In a move that neither Edward nor seemingly anyone else ever discussed, the family briefly moved to Japan. Edward was perhaps three or four—his exact age is unclear. Ijuro tried farming the family rice lands but did not like the work. After a year or so, he moved the family back to Hawaii and returned to Waikiki and waiting tables. The sojourn to Japan seemed to make little impression on Edward. It seems significant only in one way: the question of returning to the old country was put permanently to rest. Hawaii was home.

On their return, the Nakamuras bought a small frame house with a picket fence at 1349 Tenth Avenue in Palolo Valley on what then was the southeast side of Honolulu. For persons of foreign birth who were precluded from American citizenship, Ijuro and Shige were adjusting rapidly. Through Ijuro’s work at the restaurant and Shige’s work as a domestic, they were constantly exposed to spoken English. Edward, for his part, was grateful that English was the language of the household.
By his own testimony, he grew up exclusively speaking English at home, even though for eight years he walked up Tenth Avenue to the neighborhood Japanese-language school.

Shige was a good cook, and meals in the Nakamura household drew positive remarks. While most Japanese families ate exclusively with *hashi* (chopsticks), the Nakamura dinner table was set for guests with silverware, a tablecloth and cloth napkins. Relatives learned that the fork goes on the left, the knife on the right, and the spoon to the right of the knife. Between the service of the entrée and dessert, crumbs would be swept from the cloth.

During his brief hours at home, Ijuro planted a garden in the small backyard of the cottage, and little Eddie was assigned to water it. While Eddie watered, Henry was engaging neighbors in conversation at the corner store.
The Neighborhood

A majority of people in the neighborhood were of Japanese ancestry. The Suganuma family lived on one side of the Nakamura’s, and the Yamauchis on the other. The Kosasa family owned one of the two neighborhood stores and several other properties in the vicinity, foreshadowing a local business empire that would be called ABC Drugs. Otherwise the neighborhood was made up of Hawaiians and Portuguese.

The Japanese population of Honolulu had increased sharply in 1919, three years before Edward’s birth, as a result of a Japanese workers’ strike against the sugar plantations of Oahu. The workers had demanded higher wages and better working conditions. In retaliation the plantations evicted them from company housing. Large numbers of people moved from Oahu Plantation and other plantations such as Ewa, Waianae, and Waialua into make-do accommodations in Honolulu. A cry arose from the dominant Big Five corporations and their minions in the Republican Party alleging that a monolithic Japanese element—“the Japanese”—was trying to control the economy of Hawaii. When the strike was broken, many people of Japanese ancestry never returned to plantation work, but developed new lives for themselves in the city.

As a child of the emerging city, Edward was partially sheltered from the rigidly controlled plantation system and was instead exposed to the subtler possibilities of urban life. The lower Palolo Valley and its adjoining neighborhoods, Kaimuki, Moiliili, McCully and Kapahulu, were all heavily populated by Japanese immigrants and their Japanese American children. The adjacent Manoa Valley toward downtown Honolulu was a pocket of Caucasian privilege, but at the mouth of the valley was the University of Hawaii, which would contribute mightily to the broadening of opportunity in Hawaii. The university had been established in 1907, only fifteen years before Edward’s birth.

Eddie remembered childhood as “fairly pleasant.” He and his friends would hike up the valley past truck farms to the streams and ridges. They picked mountain apples and hunted for the shells of land snails. Occasionally they would venture down to Waikiki, where Eddie would lead them to his father’s restaurant. Ijuro, dressed in bowtie and white jacket, would treat Eddie and his friends to ice cream.

He attended the neighborhood school, Palolo Elementary. He also attended the neighborhood Japanese-language school, which he saw as something his parents wanted him to do. “They left what happened in
the public schools up to you to deal with . . . (but) as far as Japanese language was concerned, I think they felt they had a right to push you in that regard.”

“This is where I think I was rebelling. More or less subconsciously.” Edward felt he was one of the better students in public school but a poor student in Japanese-language school. He skipped enough classes to subvert the ancestral language project. In the eighth grade the Japanese school principal paid a visit to his parents and suggested that they not send their younger son to him anymore. Edward then was briefly sent for tutoring at night in Japanese, but he did no better. In his escape from Japanese school, he had foreshadowed his lifelong distance from the national culture of his parents.

From Palolo, he moved across Kaimuki town to Lili‘uokalani School, which was then an intermediate school. The last Hawaiian monarch, for whom it was named, had died only five years before his birth. From his years at Lili‘uokalani School, Edward most remembered a Mrs. Wong, who rigorously taught English.

The Democracy Project

From Kaimuki, Edward moved on to McKinley High School, an institution in the mid-city with a student population even more heavily of Japanese ancestry than his previous schools. As a teenager, Edward was stoutly built, with a strong brow, cheekbones and jaw. He had a thick neck and muscular shoulders, but he was not athletic. Neither was he particularly social. He was shy with girls to the point where, years later, he would avoid talking about how shy he had been.

Edward described himself at this stage as an indifferent student. Nonetheless he was struck by the visionary qualities of McKinley’s energetic principal, Miles Cary: “He was always getting up in assemblies and talking about democracy and this was the first time, of course, we had been exposed to this type of thinking.” Democracy in this bastion of progressive education started at the classroom level and went up to the student council. The student newspaper, The Pinion, was mimeographed daily. Students were expected to get involved in at least one volunteer project outside of school.

Despite his seeming indifference, Edward was recognized at least obliquely as having a good mind. He was in a “core studies” program that had been fostered by Cary, which Edward thought of as a college tracking program for the better students. Manual arts—“shop”—was
confined to one or two years, and most of Edward’s work centered on English, science, mathematics, and social science.11 Within the core studies classrooms, Edward found and carefully read many of the best liberal periodicals of the day: *The New Republic, The Nation*, and *Christian Century*. He remembered magazines titled *Asia* and *AmerAsia* as well.

Nonetheless he often claimed that he went to McKinley to eat lunch, and when the noon bell rang he and his friends would run across King Street to one of the plate lunch shops. It was one of his small jokes by which he minimized the distance in intellectual possibility that set him apart from the majority of his fellow students. He would remember a teacher in his junior year telling him, “The only reason I’m going to pass you is because I think you should go on to the university.” He enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Hawaii in the fall of 1940.

**The University of Hawaii**

Edward was one of only three individuals from the old neighborhood who went from high school directly to a higher education, for which he felt fortunate. He actively enjoyed classes for the first time. He liked the history of Western Civilization, and he was excited by his political science classes. Thanks to the English spoken in his home and the diligence of his teacher, Mrs. Wong, he was assigned not to English 101, but 102. He sat with students from the nearly all-white Punahou School and the English standard Roosevelt High School. In English 102 he was introduced to Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, and E. B. White. He got a “B,” which he understood to be the standard grade of the section.
He would laugh when he said, “I was very conscious that I was competing with haole kids for the first time.”

In his second year he transferred to a teacher-training program because it seemed to him as if a teaching job was the best a second-generation Japanese American, a nisei, could hope for. A year at UH went by and his sophomore year began. He became aware of talk of war with Japan but hoped it would go away. Because of his extensive reading, he was probably more cognizant of the likelihood of war than the average student, but he was not really grappling with what it might mean. In this he was not alone. Many of the newly American generation in Honolulu had enjoyed fairly comfortable childhoods and were yet to be confronted by the harsher realities of prejudice. As a male student at UH, Edward participated in the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC). At the time the university was routinely putting hundreds of students of Japanese ancestry through the ROTC program, creating a back door into the military. By this time the U.S. Selective Service in Hawaii was also drafting Japanese Americans. Together these practices reflected a growing but as yet undefined separation between a view in Washington that Japanese Americans were not to be trusted and a more mixed view of Army men in Hawaii who were either positively acquainted with Japanese Americans or at least in a position to dispassionately observe them. Near the end of Edward Nakamura’s third semester at UH, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.