

**TESTIMONY OF  
IRENE PEREZ PLOKE SGAMBELLURI**

During the war, I was a young girl. It was a time when I should have been playing and enjoying life surrounded by family and friends—but instead; my memories are of hardship and sacrifice.

My name is Irene Perez Ploke Sgambelluri. I was born in Hagåtña, Guam in 1931 and I am 84 years old.

In 1941, my family lived in Agat. My father, John F. Ploke, Pharmacist Mate First Class in the United States Navy, was assigned to Agat to tend to people in need of medical treatment. My mother was Beatrice Duenas Taitano Perez Ploke. In 1941, I was just 10 years old. My siblings were also very young; my brother Danny was 12 years, my sister Pauline was 9 years old and my baby sister Genevieve was only 8 months old.

On Sunday morning, December 8, 1941, our lives were forever changed. I still remember that day like it was just yesterday. We were having breakfast when we heard the sound of planes flying over the island, and saw that they were dropping black objects. Minutes later; my grandfather, Atanacio Taitano Perez, called to tell us that the United States and Japan were at war.

Before the Japanese invasion or before this day, the United States Military warned my family to leave the island, but my mother refused. She wanted to remain with my grandparents, as they were old. In the midst of the bombing, my grandfather sent his driver to help transport our family to Hagåtña, where he lived so that we could be together. We traveled light, only carrying some clothing and documents.

Once we arrived in Hagåtña, we realized we could not stay in the city, and so we found shelter at my grandmother's brother's ranch, Gregorio Duenas, in Adacao, Barrigada. For days my father hid in the jungle from the Japanese, but eventually a Japanese interpreter and two Japanese soldiers came to the ranch looking for him. They told my mother he had to surrender,

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and so my mother had me search for him. Once I found my father, I shared the news, and he removed his shirt, tied his shirt to a stick, and surrendered while holding my hand. I will never forget that day.

I did not know this then, but my father's fate was that of a prisoner of war. He was taken to Hagåtña and imprisoned in a building next to the Cathedral Basilica with other men. Days later, while taking coffee to my father, we discovered all the men—including my father—were transferred to Zentsuji Prisoner of War Camp in Osaka, Japan. We never had the chance to say goodbye, and we feared we would never see him again.

After my father was taken to Japan and with nowhere to go, we went back to Hagåtña and stayed at my grandfather's home. We were not there long, as the Japanese had us leave our home so that they could use it for their living quarters. We then found an abandoned house across the street and stayed there. The house had two beds—one reserved for my grandparents and the other for my baby sister. The rest of us slept on floor mats.

Food was scarce, and a local family was tasked with distributing and rationing rice. Our diet consisted mostly of sweet potatoes—chicken and eggs. Other meats were a luxury. In order to feed all of us, my mother would re-boil chicken, giving the better parts to my grandparents and my baby sister. We shred whatever was leftover. At nights, I could hear my mother and aunt discussing how they were going to feed our family. Each day was spent searching for food. Each day was all about survival.

At some point, we were forced to attend Japanese school and learn to read and write in Japanese. We had Chamorro teachers and one Japanese teacher. The Japanese teacher was very cruel. Because our father was in the United States Navy and we were fair skinned, he treated my siblings and I differently. He would slap my brother, pull my hair and we were always given more work. We were treated harshly as compared to our classmates.

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Most of the children were required to gather wild mushrooms, papaya, cook, and then deliver the meals to our Japanese teacher's home. We also were required to go to the ocean and gather sea cucumbers in order to slice and dry them for him. At times, my classmates and I were put in a truck and taken to a field where we planted vegetables and corn. We worked so hard and we were always hungry. We would go to the field without food or water. We made shoes out of wood and rubber-tire straps, as each of us only had one good pair of shoes and wanted to save them for when the Americans liberated us. Looking back, this truly shows that we children never lost hope. Also, interestingly—by the end of the war—most of us outgrew our shoes.

I was 13 years old when the Americans finally came. I recall seeing the planes fly over Guam. We were all overjoyed and incredibly relieved to see that the Americans were coming, but we also feared for our lives, because the bombing began yet again. During the bombings, my family became separated at one point. I recall running with some family members and finding shelter under the Hagåtña Bridge, and while there, crying and praying for the bombing to stop. On the other hand, my grandfather and my cousin, David Perez, hid in a Japanese bunker. During the bombing, they were both wounded. My grandfather's eye was torn from its socket, and my cousin was hit by shrapnel.

The bombing continued and continued. Many homes and buildings were destroyed. The Susanna Hospital was damaged. In all the confusion and terror, I will never forget, we encountered a kind Japanese corpsman that treated my grandfather's damaged eye. He ran into the destroyed hospital, found medication, and applied it to my grandfather's eye. He helped us and told us to run and hide.

Because of all the fighting and bombing, we left Hagåtña through way of San Ramon Hill. Trucks packed with Japanese soldiers passed, and the soldiers hollered demanding that we get off the road. We were very lucky we did not get killed.

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Eventually, we found shelter along the road in Sinajana and rested. We spent several days there; until Japanese soldiers demanded that we join the many people that were walking southward. We were blessed to encounter help during the walk. In fact, we met a family who saw we needed help with our injured grandfather, cousin and baby sister. They offered to carry my grandfather and look after us. This family was Mr. and Mrs. Tomas Ooka from Sinajana. They were a godsend.

We joined the many people walking, who did not know where the Japanese were taking us. We walked for two days in heavy rain while Japanese soldiers stood by, and only at night, we were able to rest on the side of the road. We finally reached an area near a river where we were told to stop. This camp was Menengon, Yona, a Japanese concentration camp. The camp was so crowded that we could only sleep sitting up. We bathed, washed clothes, and drank all from the same river. It was a wonder we did not get sick. Every moment we prayed the rosary.

The camp had little food. Mr. Ooka rationed whatever food they brought and shared it with our family. Again, I will always be grateful to the Ooka family for taking care of my family and I. Japanese guards surrounded and occupied the camp and rumors spread that they were going to start killing people. I was so scared that my life would end at the camp, but thankfully, I was spared.

Days later, American soldiers emerged from the jungle freeing us. They rescued us and took us through Mount Tenjo back to Hagåtña. The walk was very difficult, as we had to climb through hills in the heavy rain and we saw many dead soldiers along the way. Upon reaching the top of Mount Tenjo, the Americans transported us in military trucks to a staging area located at Pigo Cemetery, where the soldiers gave us shelter and food.

Shortly after we were liberated, my father returned home from Japan where he was kept as a prisoner of war. My family and I were so grateful he survived, but it was clear he suffered

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immensely. We could barely recognize him. He had lost so much weight. He was practically skin and bones.

I, along with many others, survived war. The memories are painful. I almost lost my family, my home, and the life I knew. War is not kind, and although there were many wrongdoings, there were many kind acts. With time, prayer, family support, and by sharing our stories, many survivors like me have moved on, forgiven and found peace.

Thank You and God Bless,

Irene Perez Ploke Sgambelluri