

NEW YORK NIKKEI

THE WAY OF LIFE
AS A JAPANESE
NEW YORK*Oral History of Mrs. Haru Kishi*

I was born in Shinagawa, Tokyo in 1904 and grew up with care among many brothers and sisters. I was in my third year of Yamawaki Women's High School. A teacher of History and Geography told the class of her philosophy of life. "You young Japanese should go out of this small nation in order to expand your views and to progress yourselves. Japanese should go out of the country to see the world." I was moved by her philosophy and longed to go to foreign lands.

In December, 1922 the year I graduated high school, my cousin was working in Mitsubishi shoji and temporarily returned from New York. Curious about America and foreign countries, I went to see him to find out about New York. He said, "Mr. Kishi who came to Tokyo with me for sightseeing is looking for a bride. Do you want to get married with him?" My cousin introduced me to Mr. Kishi. I fell in love with him as he was very handsome and looked smart unlike Japanese men around me at the time. In a short time, the marriage was agreed upon and we married December 27 of that year. I obtained my passport within a month and set forth to America on board Arabia Maru. I was eighteen years old and Mr. Kishi was forty-one years old.

CONEY ISLAND SUMMER CONCESSIONS AND AS AN
ELECTRICAL ENGINEER IN AUTUMN AND WINTER.

I landed in Seattle in January and took a cross country express to New York. I worked in summer concessions in Coney Island with my husband. I felt like I was drawn into summer concessions. All the Japanese who worked there looked like Ishikawa Goemon, legendary thieves with their long hair and tanned faces. I was really surprised to see them as Mr. Kishi looked very intelligent in Japan. I didn't care about his job while I was in Japan. Mr. Kishi liked to talk like a scholar. He had to take this kind of job to make a living.

I felt like I was betrayed and deceived. I cooked for a large number of workers and we lived together in a large wooden house. I spent days somewhat meaninglessly cooking for more than ten people. At that time, it was difficult to get a job competing against Whites. Most of the Japanese had to take summer concession or domestic work.

There were three different classes amongst the Japanese. There were business people who were sent here by Japanese corporations, Japanese who owned proprietary stores, and those who did summer concession or domestic work like us. The Japanese businessmen were very proud and did not mingle with people like us. They had separated mouse with mouse and cockroach with cockroach. That has not changed, even now.

Coney Island was a beach town and a busy place. Japanese made money with the game during summer and they passed time gambling September to April.

Everyone worked very hard during the summer. Some Japanese went to Columbia University, and some were very successful after they returned to Japan. As I said before, the job at Coney Island was only for the summer months. After the season was over, we moved to an apartment in Manhattan's uptown. My husband worked as an electrical engineer and we barely made a living. I became pregnant and without learning English or becoming accustomed to American life, I had my first son. The year was 1924, the thirteenth year of the era Taisho. Although unfamiliar with baby care, my boy grew up without having any illness.

My second boy, third boy, first daughter, and second daughter were born and I was busy with the children. People talked behind my back stating, "in poverty, she produces nothing but babies, Mrs. Kishi is good only for baby-making." I was so busy with childcare and I didn't have time to listen to them. Japanese always criticize others.

THE DEPRESSION TO WORLD WAR II

When WWII started, we were in the business of making lampshades. The government closed our business. The customers supported us stating that all of our five children are Americans and there is no reason the government should close the store. We continued to make lampshades, making a meager living. Right after WWII broke out, two FBI men came to investigate us. We were let go because my husband did not belong to any Japanese groups. We painted a watercolor picture on the back of the Emperor's picture and hung it up. I had heard of the Pearl Harbor bombing, but I did not understand it as I was so naive. During the war, no one both-

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ered us, we could shop, and we were given sugar and butter as we had many children. I did not feel any stress but my children experienced resentment at school. I always told them this had nothing to do with us as individuals. It is a war of one nation against another nation. All of you were born in America. Although you look Japanese, you are American, for us daily living was more important than the political affairs of the nation.

NEW YORK IS THE BEST PLACE TO BE.

The war ended but I continued to work. My husband's illness/stroke and operation kept me busy. The children had grown up and two of them were married. My children were concerned for me and suggested that I quit working. I quit my job and spent the time taking care of my husband. My second daughter, who lives in California bought me a house. I lived there until my husband passed away. I returned to New York. My son told me, " Mom, you worked so hard since you came to America, now is the time to enjoy your life. You should do whatever you want to do." With my son's help, I started painting watercolors. I have been enjoying painting Christmas cards and giving my paintings as gifts. When I returned to Japan after forty years, I was like Rip Van Winkle. Japan had changed so much and there were only a few people I had known. I did not feel any closeness to Japan. After all, I love New York.

I am living with my son now. We all have a reunion once in a while. I have so many grandchildren. When I became 77 years old, the celebration of -kijyu- about 100 people, my family and friends gave me a big party. I am very happy now. Had I not listened to my high school teacher, I would have been spending an uneventful life in Japan. I have no regrets in my life although it has not been an easy one.

I overcame thinking a little Japanese bride who came to America at the tender age of eighteen, and had grown into having this large family after seventy years. The third generation Kishi's cannot even speak Japanese but I could feel their Japanese tradition looking at how they take care of Haru Kishi.

YASUKO NAKANISHI

New York

GRAM'S OSHOGATSU

Oshogatsu. I just learned that word recently. It means New Year's Celebration. Open House.

When I think back on my childhood, I have a very special place set aside for Gram and her oshogatsu. Us kids loved that day because it was all about family, community, and being immersed in our heritage. We didn't know why it felt so fun, so easy, so belonging -- but we reveled.

Gram would cook up ozoni (even though she hated it) and Dad and Uncle Tony (who I thought resembled Buddha because of his large belly) would sit at the kitchen table and eat the little mochi balls and slurp away. Even though I didn't like ozoni I always watched with fascination, because they made it look so good. Gram would also roast mochi with sugar and shoyu for dipping. We loved especially the nutty golden-brown outer layers!

And there were endless rolls of futomaki, and teriyaki steak, Gram's Hazelton jello, and warabe. I would look at them and think, "My family is so weird -- they eat ferns! Ugh!". And there were azuki beans and Japanese yams and of course the sliced oranges. These were the big favorites with us kids! We'd take a slice and peel the rind away from the diameter, leaving a golden orange flower which we'd briefly admire before devouring the juicy golden petals. Oh, and of course, inari sushi which we called gunny sacks and, yes, spaghetti. Gram made spaghetti for the other kids who wouldn't eat nihonjin food. The food was laid out on the huge table in the dining room with red-tipped chopsticks for good luck. And we'd eat and play with our new Christmas toys, watch football with the grownup men, sit on our mothers' laps in the dining room, or hold onto their skirts as they helped in the kitchen, or, we'd play hide 'n' seek in Gram's big, scary basement! But we also got to have dessert later in the evening. Cousin Sam and his wife Edna used to bring a chocolate cake, and Gram would slice ice cream (usually maple walnut, her favorite) and we'd all partake in the sweets together.

This was when the real gossiping began around the dining room table. All that was needed was a continuous flow of hot cha.

During those family gatherings of my childhood I was too young to understand the concept of mixed heritage. Gina's kids looked Japanese enough to me, but there was something not quite Japanese about Cousins Jim and Sam -- they were sort of white. But then why were they our cousins? As a young boy, I understood the concept of interracial couples, but it never occurred to me what their

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children would look like. You either were Japanese like me, or you weren't, which meant white . . . usually. Obviously, this lack of information left me confused, a lot.

There is a special feeling I remember about being at a Japanese gathering, be it Gram's kitchen, Aunt Jean's Thanksgiving, Mom's Christmas Eve or the Immaculate Bazaar. The women all helped each other and there was a certain camaraderie amongst them that I've never sensed in any other situation. To a young Yonsei boy, this feeling represented the foundation of my world, knowing that I would always be O.K., safe, and have a place to belong. That always struck me as a feeling that the Niseis brought from the '40's -- like when my mom was growing up. Unfortunately, I've never felt this nostalgia outside of a Nikkei gathering of Niseis and Isseis and, as much as I've searched for it in other places, perhaps I will never again experience it except in the memories of my childhood.

MICHAEL ISHII

H A T S

I was in the second grade in PS 108 in the Bronx, and we were preparing our costumes for the Christmas pageant. We were busy cutting construction paper and pasting. The classroom was filled with 30 second graders creating hats for the season's show. The theme of the pageant was the international origins of Christmas traditions. Peter Wankmeller would dress up as Santa Claus and facilitate the show. David Menihan and Keith Richards would wear German costumes and explain the origin of Christmas cards. Maria Ferrara and Joanna Malantino wore Italian costumes and described the origin of gift giving. Charisse Walker and Yvonne Jacobs would talk about the three wisemen and dressed in Middle Eastern attire. Lauren Shapiro would speak on how Chanukkah fit into the picture and Kosik Das was to talk about wisemen bringing incense and myrrh from India.

Mrs. Pollack, our teacher, walked around the room assisting and advising her pupils. She suggested green and brown hats for David and Keith, and helped them create a pattern. She helped Kosik make an elaborate headdress as a wiseman should have. She helped Peter invent new ways to make a realistic Santa Claus hat. We cut and glued to make beautiful hats out of crepe paper, construction paper, pins and paste. I was especially impressed with the dainty hats Joanna and Maria were to wear. They were hollowed-out ellipses made out of oak tag. The elliptical rings were covered with multi-

colored crepe paper flowers. They were so pretty! I hoped Mrs. Pollack would help me make a hat like that!

Eventually, she did get around to me. I was excited because I knew she liked me and would help me make a pretty hat. Before my turn came, however, she showed Judy, a Chinese girl how to make a plain brown hat. I looked at that brown hat in dismay and inwardly assured myself that I would not make such an atrocious garment to adorn my head! When I told Mrs. Pollack that I too, wanted a hat like Joanna's and Maria's, she said they were representative of a different country and that I would have to come up with something different. She brought me to the table where minutes earlier, Judy had been, and helped me design a hat out of black construction paper. The hat she helped me design resembled a rice paddy hat. I was upset that I could not wear a pretty, colorful hat like the other girls and started to cry. Mrs. Pollack comforted me and said maybe we could find something more appropriate for me to wear. Since it was close to 3:00, she made us clean up our mess so we could line up and march two by two out of school. I was very sad that day as I walked home from school. I did not even want to play in the snow with my best friend Elizabeth. I could not tell her how I felt because she had blonde hair and green eyes and if she had been in my class, she would have gotten to wear a pretty hat like Joanna and Maris.

Several weeks went by and there was no more mention of hats or costumes because we were busy studying about Math and History and other topics. I was so involved in other things that I did not really think about what kind of hat I was to wear. I had prepared my speech on holiday candles and was excited about the show. The night before the pageant, my mother had me try on my costume. She brought out a big box, and in it was a beautiful kimono and an intricate sash (obi). The back of this sash had a beautiful ornament. On it were colorful cloth flowers, pins with silver trinkets, little bells, and a large red and gold bow. "This is a Japanese holiday kimono" my mother told me. She had brought it with us when we came to the United States.

At the pageant, my costume was the jewel of the show. All my classmates were awed by the brilliance of the kimono. The parents commented on the beauty of the cloth. Mrs. Pollack complimented my kimono and afterwards, asked my mother of its origin. I was happy that the pageant had turned out well and relieved that I didn't have to wear an ugly black farmers cap; but twelve years later, this memory is vivid where others have faded.

MARI MATSUMOTO

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SO, WHAT ARE YOU ANYWAY?

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In Japan, like other *not so ordinary* people, there's a name for someone with my background. They call me a *Kikokushijo*, which is literary translated as "returnee children." Kids who spent a part of their lives abroad for reasons of their father's temporary assignments to overseas countries come home to Japan and go through a rigorous adjustment to their studies and lifestyles. Often, *Kikokushijos* are admired for their ability to speak a foreign language, and praised by schools and businesses for having the ability to bring in an "international flavor" to their institutions. But they are also shunned by their lack of "Japaneseness" in their values. Japan is still a very homogeneous country, and even full blooded Japanese citizens like the *Kikokushijos* experience disapproval from society if they can't assimilate to the mass culture.

Although I never lived long enough in Japan to experience total assimilation, when I had to transfer into the Japanese schools, I tried as hard as I could to be like everyone else. I tried to limit my comments that reflected my experience abroad, and made gestures that gained approval from everyone else. I couldn't say things like, "Hey, I don't agree with that, here's my idea." I learned to say, "Wow, that's a great idea, I really think it has some great points. Let's try to work our ideas together in some way."

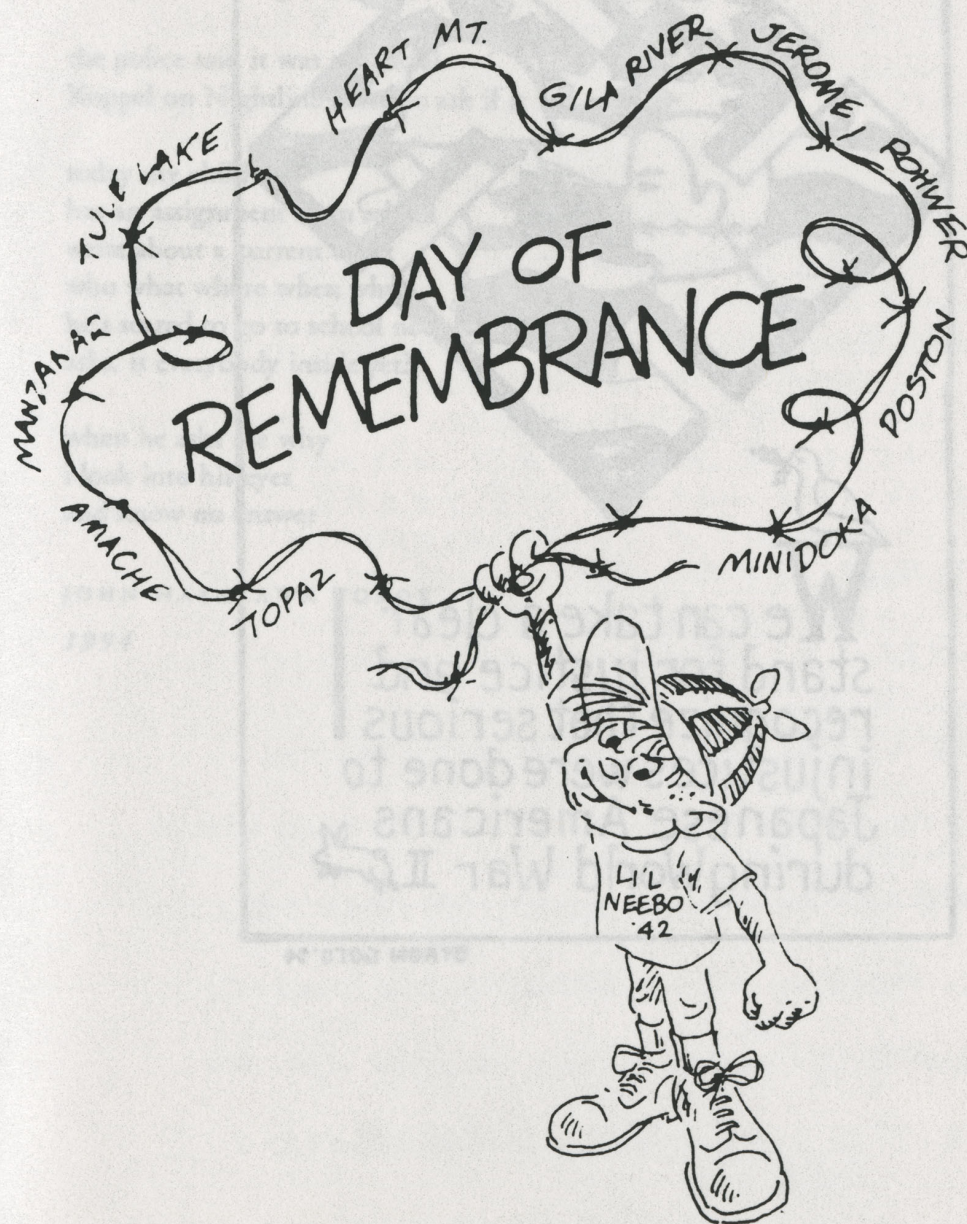
Now that I live in New York, I experience both the Japanese and American way of communicating. As a kid growing up in ten different cities around the world, it was an incredibly disorienting experience, but what I gained from that has become an invaluable strength. I relate to experiences of everyone from Japanese nationals to *Yonseis*. Because of that, learning about the Japanese American experience during World War II has been a very big interest for me. As I talked to those who survived the camps, and those who fought the war on the American side, I am astonished by how incredibly similar their experiences were to what I have heard in Japan by Japanese nationals. They thought of their families the same way, they craved for the same Japanese sweets on the frontline, and they were both very proud of their Japanese heritage.

Unfortunately, hardly anyone in Japan knows about the Japanese American experience. In a country where *Kikokushijos* don't get much sympathy, *Nikkeis* aren't even mentioned. The Japan that all the *Isseis* knew is very different from modern day Japan, but I feel

that the most fundamental values are still strong. This common bond between *Nikkeis* and Japanese nationals should be the key to bring more understanding between Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals.

I often wonder how I fit into this whole Japanese American history. I see my self thinking just as American as the *Yonseis*, but find my self adjusting comfortably with Japanese values when I live in Japan. It could be that there are no "typical" Japanese American experiences afterall. I reconciled my confusion with my identity through hearing experiences and sharing my own to others. I hope that I'll continue with this quest for learning about others' experiences and be able to find out about myself in the process.

HAJIME ANDO



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