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Hara, Kalvin K.

Interview

Apr. 1982

(Thomas Kikuchi)

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THOMAS KIKUCHI

April 11, 1982

Thomas Kikuchi preferred to answer my questions in writing.

Dear Dr. Wax:

My sister, Mrs. Jennifer Hara, sent me your interview questions to answer, so here goes --

LIFE BEFORE EVACUATION

Born August 13, 1930, at Newcastle, California, a small farming community north of Sacramento, California. My parents were fruit farmers, raising peaches, prunes and grapes. I went to school before evacuation; working after school picking tomatoes and working in the orchards in the summer time. I would say life was hard during my early years, but as the boys in the family grew, we were able to purchase a gas stove, refrigerator, washing machines -- things people take for granted now, but then it was for our family luxuries. My family expected me to go to college, and there was no doubt in my mind that I would. At the risk of sounding conceited, I was a good student.

FIRST STAGES OF EVACUATION

When I heard we were going to be evacuated, I didn't quite comprehend what it was all about. However, I do recall my mother hiding the kitchen knives because we didn't want the FBI to confiscate it and charge us with possession of deadly weapons.

Probably the most traumatic experience was my association with my buddies. I had mostly caucasian friends, and one of my closest friends lived down the road and we usually went to school together on our bikes. With the declaration of war, his parents forbade him to associate with me. I'm sure it was just as hard on him as it was on me. I guess that was my first overt experience with racial discrimination. In school I was being left out of most activities. Even my teacher treated me at arms length.

Our family was sent to the Stockton Fairgrounds, Stockton, California, which was called the Assembly Center. We were housed in hurridly constructed tar-papered barracks, eating at the community mess halls and using communal bathrooms.

What I remember most about the place is it was crowded. Some of the families were actually housed in horse stables. I remember teasing some of my classmates about how they stunk -- and they really did.

We were given inoculations against the more common diseases. I suppose the hospital was fully staffed, although I had no occasion to go there.

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There was no interruption in our education. We had classes at the center, even though most of the teachers were not credentialed but were fellow evacuees who had gone to college or were going to college when they were interned.

Considering the predicament we were in, I think the elders did a tremendous job in keeping up our morale. We had talent shows, sports activities, and myriad other activities to keep us busy. I don't know as I would act the same way if I were put behind barbed wire fences today. So I would say our conduct was the most laudable.

LIFE IN THE RELOCATION CAMPS

Our family was sent to Rohwer, Arkansas, Relocation Camp. I didn't particularly feel any anxiety in learning that I would be sent there. By now I had pretty much adjusted to the camp life: the lack of privacy, the knowledge that we were going to be here for a long time.

I think the Christmas of 1942 stands out in my memory. There was a Christmas party for the kids and I received a present donated by the people on the outside. Just when I thought everybody out there hated us, I get this present and it restored my faith in mankind again.

I was still a pretty good student. I remember a science project where I spent nearly a year collecting and cataloging plants and leaves from trees indigenous to the area. I was seriously considering a career as a botanist or a horticulturist.

The thing that really started to get me scared was the talk about my parents wanting to return to Japan. I could barely understand what my parents were saying, must less read and write the language. When I learned that we were going to leave Rohwer and go to Tule Lake and eventually to Japan, that was the lowest point in my life.

TULE LAKE

I dreaded going to Tule Lake, knowing that eventually I would have to accompany my parents to Japan. Now I spent half day in a Japanese language class and half day in the English language class, doing poorly in both. I lost all incentive to study.

I felt bitter toward those people who were pro-Japan and were encouraging my father to side with them. They would shave their heads and act like they were members of the Imperial Army. My father, I think, just wanted to go back to Japan where he owned land and would be able to live out his remaining years in relative tranquility. He knew he was too old to start over again in the U.S. He was in his sixties then.

Unlike Stockton and Rohwer camps, there was hostility and suspicion. There were fights and arguments and accusations among the people. Finally it all culminated in a riot of a sort at the administration building where they were protesting the food and the living condition, which was becoming

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intolerable. Then the army took over the patrol, and for a while we had curfew and restrictions.

Finally, on December 25, 1946, we left Tule Lake for our journey to Japan.

EXPERIENCES

The experiences that helped me most probably was learning to get along with people. Having to live in close quarters, no where "to get away from it all," I had to learn to adjust to adversities. This experience made my four years in the military service very easy.

The most painful experience I guess would have to be the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. If I learned anything from this, I guess it would be that nothing is hopeless, that with patience and determination you can overcome any disparity and succeed. It helped me out years later when I didn't know where or when my next meal was going to come from, to think: at least I'm free to come and go as I please.

AFTER LEAVING TULE LAKE

I would say the four or five years after leaving Tule Lake were the hardest time of my life. Having survived that, I knew I could survive anything.

When we arrived in Japan in 1946, the country was in utter chaos. There were people coming back from China, Manchuria, the Philippines, Taiwan, Korea, and wherever else they might have been. It seemed as though half of Japan was bombed out. People were sleeping in train stations, in makeshift cardboard houses; people looking for scraps of food, begging for food. I remember once passing out on the street, and when I woke up I was in a hospital. They told me I was suffering from malnutrition. I hadn't eaten in weeks. Eventually I was hired as an interpreter for the U.S. military occupation forces. As an American citizen, I was allowed to live in a foreign national dormitory and to eat my meals there. Fortunately, one of my brothers was on occupation duty, and he lent me the money to return to the United States.

I was 17 years old when I returned here. I had \$20 in my pocket. I worked in a restaurant washing dishes from 6:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m., 6½ days a week. My pay was \$160 per month. After a year and a half, I decided there was no future in that, so I enrolled in high school. I worked in a private home for room and board while attending school. Now that I think of it, they had a bargain. For \$25 a month, they had me do all the things they would have had to pay a full time servant ten times as much.

For a long time I was even ashamed to tell people I had been interned in camps during the war. It was almost like I had committed a crime and was incarcerated for it. Now that it is in the open, I feel that a tremendous load has been lifted off my shoulders. I am gradually getting to the point of talking about it without getting too emotional.

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EFFECTS OF THE CAMPS

When we were herded into the camps, for all intents and purposes that was the end of our family as a unit. I don't feel the closeness I once had. In fact, I sometimes feel very uncomfortable when we get together and talk about old times. I would just as soon forget about those unhappy days.

I feel I was cheated because I really never had an adolescent life. I started high school at 18 years of age, never had a social life because I was working my way through, never experienced the things that teenagers do. I don't have a class reunion to attend because I graduated under a special program they had for veterans at the City College of San Francisco. I dread holidays because of all my experiences in having to work on those days to pay my tuition, having no family to share my thoughts with or to be with during those days. I put on a front at parties and get-togethers, but my wife sees right through the facade.

After military service, I supported my wife and daughter while attending school under the G.I. Bill and working odd jobs. After finishing school, I couldn't get a job in San Francisco. Many of the firms told me they could really use my services but their clients might not approve. So I moved away from San Francisco and have been living in this city now for 23 years. For almost 22 years I have been an official court reporter for the Superior Courts of this county. I am proud of the fact in all those years I haven't failed to file my trial transcripts on time, often working seven days a week, 15-hours a day.

My camp experiences left me with a terrible sense of insecurity. I have this fear about being poor and hungry again. I am constantly striving for more security, even though I could retire now and probably live on my pension and the investments I have made. I attribute a lot of that on my camp and post-camp experiences.

I earnestly feel we were interned because of pressures put on the government by people who are racists and who stood to gain financially by our evacuation. My biggest disappointment is the Supreme Court of the United States. If this matter were brought before it now, there would be no question but that they would rule against the evacuation. They just didn't have the guts to interpret the law as it should have been.

However, even with all the imperfections and the frailties inherent in our system, this is still the greatest country to live in. I feel I have become a better American because of what happened to me.

With warmest regards, I am,

Very truly yours,

Thomas Kikuchi

KALVIN K. HARA
2635 MAPLEWOOD LANE
SANTA CLARA, CALIFORNIA 95051

April 11, 1982

Dr. Rosalie Hankey Wax
Department of Anthropology
Campus Box 1114
Washington University
St. Louis, Missouri 63130

Dear Dr. Wax:

Jennifer Hara

My sister, Mrs. ~~Jane Wong~~, sent me your interview questions to answer, so here goes --

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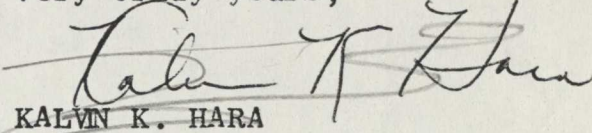
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