

50:14 Term Paper on Yoshiko Uchida

1986

by Sadako Kashiwagi

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Term Paper  
UC-12/86

#### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

To be honest, I wasn't sure why I chose Yoshiko Uchida for my project. In fact, I had some mixed feelings, for I had avoided reading her books on purpose because I knew that they would be too close to my experience. But as I started to read her works, I have come to realize how valuable her books are both from a multi-cultural and historical points of view. Her first book, The Dancing Kettle and Other Stories has many of the traditional folktales I had heard as a child. The Magic Listening Cap was a treat to read as I had not heard those stories before. Makoto, the Smallest Boy and Rokubei and the Thousand Rice Bowls are originals which were based on her observations of Japanese life. Both reflect so many familiar cultural values which we share as Japanese Americans raised by Meiji-era parents.

Her more recent books starting with Journey to Topaz were more painful as eleven-year-old Yuki's wartime evacuation experiences paralleled mine in so many ways. But these are stories which should be told and read as our history textbooks mention the episode only in passing. She writes about our experiences accurately, honestly and clearly without bitterness or rancor. Perhaps she is too gentle, but that too is a part of our cultural heritage. As she says, our Issei<sup>1</sup> parents were non-assertive but there was real strength there. One of her recurring themes is that there is always hope no matter how desperate things may seem.

It is my hope that readers of her books will gain some understanding and insight into our common human condition and will better accept and respect our unique differences.

<sup>1</sup> Japanese immigrants (first generation)



## YOSHIKO UCHIDA

Eleven-year-old Yuki doesn't understand why her father is abruptly taken away shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Rinko is eleven and wishes that she had blond hair instead of black, that she didn't have to go to Japanese language school, and that she wasn't so different from the other children. These are but a few of the painful feelings that prompted Yoshiko Uchida to write her more recent books about growing up in Berkeley as a Japanese American. She says that the character of Rinko is based on her own life. The other characters are fictionalized.

"But I gave Rinko more gumption than I had." It was Rinko's Aunt Waka in A Jar of Dreams who gave Rinko a sense of her own worth and of her own self. "It happened much earlier for Rinko than it did for me," she says.

In real life, Miss Uchida has an older sister, but she created an older brother, Cal, who volunteered for the U. S. Army to prove his loyalty. He is one of many who volunteered from the camps. This issue of loyalty and military service broke up many families and friendships. Today, forty years later, some of those men who held opposing views will cross the street to avoid speaking with each other. At any rate, Cal was created to work in the important story of the exploits of the all-Nisei 100/442nd Regimental Combat Team.

The Rinko series (A Jar of Dreams, The Best Bad Things, The Happiest Ending, Journey to Topaz, Journey Home, and an adult book, Desert Exile) were all written to give Sansei<sup>2</sup> and Yonsei<sup>3</sup> Japanese Americans a sense of history, a sense

<sup>2</sup> Children of Nisei or third generation Japanese Americans

<sup>3</sup> Children of Sansei



of pride, and a sense of continuity and kinship with the past. She wants them to know about the strong family and community that nurtured and helped us to survive. One of her messages to the Nisei is, "You need not be ashamed about being sent to the camps because you didn't do anything wrong." To this day, many Nisei are ashamed of the experience. Many have not and still will not talk about the war-time experience because it is too painful to recall. When our Sansei children ask about it, a typical reply would be, "It's the past, I'd rather not talk about it." Miss Uchida started writing about the experience about 15 years ago when the Sansei demanded, "How could you allow yourselves to be sent to concentration camps?"

In Desert Exile, she writes about her sense of rejection and alienation which increased during high school. She hated high school so much that she took extra courses and graduated at 16 and started at the University of California at Berkeley where her sister was already a student. She found that college (where sororities and fraternities flourished) was worse than high school. So by joining segregated campus groups and by participating in community church groups, she found something to sustain her wounded spirit.

Miss Uchida's background is quite unique--both her parents were graduated from Doshisha University in Tokyo, Japan. Her parents spoke English because of their exposure and contacts with Caucasian instructors. Her father was a "salary man" with the Mitsui Company in San Francisco. She grew up in an environment where educated people passed through their home. Although she resented the time her mother lavishly shared with others,



her exposure to the exchange of ideas, both oral and written, was invaluable to her. She says, "We learned that the printed word was very important." Her mother was a poet who wrote tanka under the pen name of Yukari. Some of these tanka are included in Desert Exile. Both her mother and father wrote letters; she credits her mother as being her role model.

Yoshiko was an avid reader as a child and remembers reading all the classics and even enjoying mysteries. Her first exposure to literature was in oral Japanese. Her mother read the traditional folk tales to Keiko (her older sister) and her. She also learned many Japanese children's songs. Her first book, The Dancing Kettle and Other Stories was published in 1949.\* It has many of the tales her mother had read to her. She didn't have any trouble getting it published; she was taking a children's literature course where she met an editor from Harcourt Brace to whom she submitted her manuscript and it was accepted. She concurs that she was in the right place at the right time. The Dancing Kettle and Other Stories has since been reprinted.

In 1952, she was granted the Ford Foundation Foreign Study and Research Fellowship to Japan. While in Japan, she gathered ideas for more children's stories which she later wrote, based on her observations of Japanese life. Although many stories are adapted from the Japanese, Makoto, the Smallest Boy, and Rokubei and the Thousand Rice Bowls are originals. Some of her books have been translated into Dutch and German. Just as

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\* At the time Miss Uchida was a school teacher.



important was the fact that her stay in Japan helped to heal the wounds--she regained her sense of pride in her heritage while she learned about Japanese culture. She became interested in pottery and folkcrafts; she has written many articles for crafts journals.

Her professional activities have included talks to numerous children's groups. The children are usually unaware of the history of the concentration camps in the United States. They thought that had only happened in Germany. They ask: "Were you scared? What happened to your dog? Do you have brothers or sisters? What was the food like?" In turn she asks them, "Why do you think I write these stories?" She hopes that they will say, "So it will never happen agin." But sometimes she has to provide the answer. Once a boy asked, "Do you write your stories about evacuation for revenge?" She says, "No, it is all right to be angry but people who are bitter destroy themselves."

Although Miss Uchida's most recent books have been about the evacuation experience, she has written a historical novel about the attempt to start a tea and silk colony in El Dorado County. She researched the book by interviewing Fern Sayne of Sacramento who is now deceased. She also read newspaper accounts at the University of California library. The only true characters are Okei, the young woman, and Henry Schnell, the others are fictional.

It took 10 years for Desert Exile to be published. She



was always told that there wasn't a market for such a book. But the redress inquiries and testimonies in the summer of 1981 resulted in an increased awareness and interest in the evacuation experience. She credits Michi Weglyn's The Years of Infamy for helping to make her book more acceptable; she says she improved it by making it more personal. But another book, Picture Bride, based on oral histories of Issei women of her church, has had similar publishing problems. It will be published in the spring of 1987, ten years after completion. She has a children's picture book, The Two Foolish Cats coming out at the same time. It is illustrated by Margo Zemach, a Caldecott winner and a Berkeley resident--"that made it nice to work with her."

When asked about the absent or ineffectual parent syndrome in modern fiction, her response was that she gets many letters from children who live in single parent homes and they must learn to face that reality and it should be written about. She does feel, however, that the syndrome is dying out. She objects to writers who write "for the market"; for example, child abuse is a major issue now and the subject for many writers.

Miss Uchida has curtailed her activities in the last two years because of poor health. She walks to restore her health and is now writing poetry in response to what she observes on these walks. She has sold a poem to an anthology but says, "poetry books are impossible to sell."

In all of the sources I used, the recurring theme has been



that, "I hope to enlarge the reader's understanding about the human condition. It's important that we all take pride in our cultural experience, so we don't lose that feeling of the community of man." She stresses the need for hope and a strong sense of family and community.

After the telephone interview, I sent a follow-up note in which I asked, "was writing about the camp experience painful or cathartic or rewarding or satisfying or all of the above?" The note came back with "all of the above" circled. Since I've completed this project, I ask myself the same question and my answer is also, "all of the above." As I said, I had never read her books until now because the subjects were/are too close to me. I, too, can remember wishing for blond hair, but now that my hair is turning gray, I wish it were black. I can laugh about my hair now, but it was not a laughing matter when I was growing up.



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of her books and papers will be sent there.