Japanese-American Oral History Project

Kenge Kobayashi

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Place: Eugene, Oregon
Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig

Part 2 – 30:20 minutes

EU: This is Part 2. **0:00**

So Kenge, when you …were starting to talk about your move to Tule Lake. Do you remember …Did you go by train? How did they transport you?

KK: Yes,they took us from the camp they took us on a bus to a train station. And we were on a train to Tule Lake. And got off the train and got back on a bus and took us to camp, to Tule Lake camp. And, when we traveled on the train, the shades were all drawn, we didn't' know where we were going. They didn't tell us where we were going. And we didn't know where we were. But we ended up in Tule Lake. And there were no welcoming us or anybody. We just walked in and barracks were assigned to us

1:45

EU: Did you go… Why did they send you to Tule Lake? Was it because of the "no-no"?

KK: Yes, that was the only reason. And those were trying times because I made a lot of friends there when I was in Gila and had to say good bye to them.. And there among the Japanese, and the Japanese-American, they were sort of divided at that time, the no-no and yes-yes at that time. And there was sort of animosity between the no-nos and the yes-yes people. So that was terrible there.

2:50

But when we landed in Tule Lake, we were assigned to … the barracks there were really bad. Gila River – they had nice, new barracks there, built, but Tule Lake was an old, a bunch of old barracks with tar paper onthere and holes in the floor so the wind comes through. And the living quarters was very small – smaller than what we had in Gila River. We had … oh, I don't know what the size were. But, each barrack was broken

into four units and the family was in one unit and we were on the end of the barrack. And we had the largest room because we had six of us. And, but there was no privacy. We had to put a sheet, a bedspread to divide the women and the girls from the men. So we had a little privacy but that was it.

4:35

But Tule Lake was a bad camp. There was, just, … we were all considered disloyals, you know, by the government and we were treated as such. They didn't have much privileges there.

We had curfew, had to be in bed by 9 o'clock and nobody wandered around at night time. And the food was bad; and we had hardly anything to eat. And … everything was bad. We had to line up for mess hall, for our meals. And then we had to line up for taking a shower. We had separate shower stalls in the bathrooms from our barracks, So we had to walk to the place and then get in line there. A lot of time there were lines. So it was just terrible place all together.

EU: Were you able to bring anything from Gila River?

KK: No, whatever we could carry, that was it.

6:18

EU: How was that for your mother? How was it, I mean… what did she do while she was there?

KK: My mother started working on the farm. They had farms at Tule Lake outside of the camp. They had fields of vegetables and stuff growing. And my mother volunteered for that, worked on the farm. But my father was a janitor for the mess hall. And I was going to school and the kids were all going to school.

7:08

But Tule Lake was a very volatile place. They found out that the WRA, the people who was managing the camp, was stealing a lot of our food that was supposed to come to – like meat, milk, and coffee and stuff like that. And they were selling it on the black market. It was supposed to come to us and we found out about that. And so we started a riot. And then we went to the manager - at that time the management was not fenced

off so we could just walk in there. So we went over there and we kind of raised hell a lot and complained about out shortage of food and stuff like that. And they pulled out a couple of guys and beat them up and stuff like that, you know, kind of stuff.

8:40

EU: Who was doing the protesting? Were your parents, or your father, or was it mostly young people?

KK: Mostly young people. And people like me, too, and I was still young and it was an excitement. So I got carried away. But it was the young people who started it. They started speaking at different locations in camp; and a lot of time, the people were influenced by the speeches and everybody got riled up. And they said, let's strike and lets do this and riot and stuff like that. And that's how everybody got and opposed to management and complained.

9:50

And what the management did, they called the military. There was a military camp right outside Tule Lake and so they called them in and they came in with tanks and guns, all kinds of stuff, and tear gases. And they dispersed the crowd with tear gas, and I was in the middle of all that. (Kenge laughs) And then the military took over the whole camp. They were guarding, going around with their tanks between the barracks, and then they put a curfew on like 8 o'clock. We have to be the barracks by 8 o'clock. And then they were arresting a lot of people, too, who they thought was the leaders and they arrested them.

And then the military delivering our food to the mess hall. And what they did with their trucks was they came up. And all these trucks had machine guns on top, and they stopped by the mess hall and they dropped, from the trucks, they just dropped and the crate broke and the food and all the food were splattered all over. And that's how they delivered it.

11:45

And meanwhile, we had a strike. The farm workers had a strike, my mother was on strike with the rest of the farm. And weren't getting any food from the farm.

EU: The food on the farm was intended for the camp?

KK: Yes, for the camp. And we weren't getting any of that, too. And so we were in pretty bad shape. The food was … so that went on for a few weeks. Then about a month later they went back to normal, you know. The strike was over and the farm products came back in. We were delivering our own food and stuff like that and so it got back to normal.

12:40

EU: What did your parents think about you protesting and participating?

KK: My parents were very quiet. They didn't participate or anything like that.

EU: But they didn't stop you.

KK: No, they didn't stop me. (laughs) But they just kind of gave me hell for being such a mischievous person. But I was a – what I did during the strike was I got on top of the management cars, they had cars, and I smashed the car tops. And all kinds of stuff like that. So that was fun for me.

EU: Did things improve then afterward, food delivery?

KK: Yes, it gradually improved. We had better food. We had our milk, and coffee, and sugar, and then meat. We had a lot of vegetables because of the farm, and we had fruits from the farmers nearby we got oranges and apples and stuff. So it was pretty good afterwards.

14:28

EU: DId you ever leave the farm? You said you mother left for the farm… Did you ever leave for working?

KK: No, I didn't work, I was going to school, so I didn't work. But what happened was that they had this young people's group; they started a club, what they called a club, It was called Seinen-dan. And they were really … most of them were what they called kibeis. Kibeis were the ones that were born in America but they were sent to Japan before the war and got educated there and they came back. So they, a lot of them were pro-Japanese and they wanted to go back to Japan and all that stuff. And so they started this club. But they were a very powerful organization. They ruled the camp

‘cause everyone was afraid of them. And they were all a bunch of young people and they were all judo experts and stuff like that. And if they thought somebody was either snitching on them or they were against them, they pulled them out of the barracks and beat them up, and things like that. So people were afraid of them. They became powerful in camp and they started to rule everything, like baseball games, they started to rule everything.

16:25

And then they started this Japanese school. We had this Japanese school there. And I was …. My folks told me to go to the Japanese school. But the Japanese school was very pro-Japanese/Japan. The teachers were all gung-ho Japan, and so they were trying to instill the Japanese into us. And so I was going to English school during the day and then after school I was going to Japanese school

EU: Did you speak Japanese growing up?

KK: Yes, because my parents were speaking Japanese. But, it got me kind of mixed up, because at the English school they were teaching patriotism and America. And I would go to the Japanese school - they were teaching you Japan. So I was so torn between the two. And, I think a lot of people were like that, too.

17:45

And, then the worst part was, the organization, the Seinen-dai, the young people’s group, they influenced us to renounce our citizenship and go back to Japan and renounce their citizenship – the American citizenship. So They were going around telling everybody you’re going to go back to Japan, go to Japan. You got to renounce your citizenship so you become strictly Japanese. citizens. And they went around influencing everybody to renounce their citizenship. And fortunately I was too young to renounce my citizenship. But my sister and my older brother renounced their citizenship because of the influence from them. And it was also the fault of the government, because the government put an amendment to the constitution that you could renounce your citizenship if you desired to and that made it all the worse. And my brother and my sister renounced their citizenship. Because at that time we all thought we were all going back to Japan, that they would deport us to Japan.

19:25

So towards the end of the war my father was thinking of going back to Japan and taking the family with him. That's when my sister stood up for her rights.

EU: This was your older sister?

KK: Yes, she was the oldest

EU: What was her name?

KK: Toshi – Toshiko. And she says, I don't want to go back to Japan, to Japan. Because there's nothing there. They are losing the war. And we'll be starving over there and we won't have a job or we won't be accepted in Japan to start with. And she says, I'm not going, us kids, she was speaking about us. She never discussed it with us kids. But she says, us kids are going to stay, you folks can go back. She was a strong woman.

EU: How old was she at this time?

KK: She was about twenty-one, twenty-two, something like that. And so she stood our grounds and my father who was … the Japanese custom is that the woman has less of a place. And besides being a daughter speaking against her parents, he was just astonished. But he thought it over, and says the family should stick together so we'll go with you guys. And that was when the government said we could go out, either go to Japan or go outside. We had a choice.

EU: What year was this?

KK: This was 1945.

EU: The war was over.

KK: Yes, by the time the government said we could go out, the war was finished already. So when my sister said that, then my father thought it over and said we better stay, too, so that's when they decided to stay.

EU: What did your older brother think?

KK: He thought the same way, he thought to stay here.

EU: But they had renounced their citizenship?

KK: Yah, they had renounced their citizenship already.

EU: Could they get it back then?

KK: No, not at that time. So they had no citizenship. So but when we came out, when we were released my sister and my brother stayed behind because they couldn't get out because of their renunciation. But the rest of us went.

22:50

I just graduated high school then, that was the last graduating class there. And I thought, hey, you know, I graduated school, it's about time I go out on my own. So I heard about this … like in Sacramento there was a camp there taking in all the ex-internees and this was out on a farm and they make you work on a farm and so I said I'm going to go there, you know. But my folks said they're gonna go somewhere else and they went to southern California to work on a farm.

EU: But what happened to their farm then in Imperial Valley?

KK: Oh, nothing. They couldn't get it back anymore.

EU: Couldn't get it back.

KK. No. Everything was lost. And, so they went to southern California to work on a farm. They were just working there.

EU: Working for..

KK: Yes, they were working for American, Caucasian farmers. I went to Sacramento and worked for Caucasian farmers there, but this camp was set up there, so…

EU: You said - your older brother and sister they had to stay…

KK: Yes, they had to stay in camp for a while, but they came out eventually.

EU: What about your younger sister, younger ..?

KK: Brother, yes he went with my father, the family. But they ended up … my sister was married by then.

EU: Your older sister?

KK: She got married in camp and so she went, they went to Fresno to work on a grape farm there. And I went to Sacramento, and I was seventeen, I was going to be eighteen, and I worked on a farm. Umm, this was for a couple of years, I guess, I worked on a farm.

25:15

And I was writing letters to my folks, and my folks says you know we're having a hard time over here because we're hardly making any money. And we can't buy food, 'cause they won't sell us any food or the stores are all closed to us, they don't want to sell anything to us. They don't want to sell to Japs. So my folks had to travel about fifty miles to the next town to buy food and stuff like that. So they were having a hard time and besides my mother had what they call phyria or something … she had to take out all her teeth and all that stuff. And so they were in bad shape.

And meanwhile I was working in Sacramento and I was working without any day off, I was working seven days a week. And I had no chance of going to a bank, so I was hiding all my money under the mattress. So I told my family to come to Sacramento there's a lot of work here on the farm and there's no prejudice. So that's what they did. They came over. And when they came over they were flat broke, they had a few dollars in their pocket, that was it. And I took the money out from under my mattress, I had

about $4,000. And that's a lot of money in those days, you know, and I gave it to them. I saw tears in my mother's eyes, you know.

EU: That's a lot of money…

KK: Any time I got the money I just – I got paid cash so I just put it under my mattress because I didn't know where to put it, you know.

27:51

So we started farming - working on the farm there as a family, as a whole family. And we got enough money to -- So they wanted to start their own farm, so they went back to LA, near LA to a place called Carson, and started a farm there.

EU: Carson?

KK: Yes, Carson. It used to be called Dominguez Hills. And they started a small farm there.

EU: So they used your money to buy … Could they buy the land at that time?

KK: No, still they had to lease the land. But they bought equipment and everything with the money and started a farm.

EU: What kinds of – was it vegetables or what kinds of things …

KK: Yes, it was a vegetable farm. Cabbages and celery and stuff like that.

29:05

EU: Why don't we, before we stop again, tell me the names. What were your parents' names?

KK: My mother's name was Nobu, N-O-B-U Kobayashi. And my father's name was Kihei K-I-H-E-I. And …

EU: Older brother?

KK: My older brother was George. Any my older sister was Toshi. And my younger brother was Sam.

EU: So your sister and you had Japanese names. But then George ..

KK: Yes, George. I don't know why called him George. But he died a few years ago. He died of a liver chirosis. He was an alcoholic. My sister and my brother, younger brother are still living. They're in California.

End of Part 2 **30:20**