

## The transcript of a conversation

The following text is a transcript of a recording made by Meriko Maida and her sister Asako Tokuno, both of California, who watched the 1990 film *Come See the Paradise* and were sometimes asked questions by the recording engineer, Shira, Meriko's niece and Asako's daughter. The recording took place in 2007.

Mention is made of Ken Burns' [\*The War\*](#), in which Asako had a part as a talking head, representing the viewpoint of Japanese-Americans in the Sacramento area during World War II. Tony Tokuno, of the 442nd Infantry Regiment—Asako's brother-in-law, was also in the Burns program.

The film opens with an Irish immigrant in trouble on the US East Coast, and he is sent by his union to Los Angeles, where he works as a projectionist in Little Tokyo. He falls in love with a daughter from the Japanese family owning the theater, and therefore becomes a witness to their incarceration. US residents of at least 1/16 Japanese ancestry were required to leave the West Coast, and those who did not were relocated to one of ten camps inland from the Pacific Ocean. This was the infamous order 9066. It affected approximately 120,000 people.

The Maida family was resident in Richmond, California before and after the war.

M: We didn't go through that in Richmond.

S: No violence?

M: Not that we know of...There's plenty of it now.

S: In LA?

M: I guess so. This is set in Little Tokyo [LA], so...

A: How many days [notice] did Papa get?

M: Well, Richmond was designated as 'A', which is a very crucial area, so they made them leave—the aliens [=non-citizen] leave before [the general Japanese population], and they announced it on the Richfield Reporter on the 10 o'clock news that they had to go.

A: The next day?

M: That night!

A: Oh

M: So, they got in the car and they went.

A: I don't remember that.

M: Junko went. Yah, that was a dirty trick, I think.

A: I don't remember that.

M: It was earlier than...

A: Everybody else.

M: ...the appointed time.

A: So, how did they make arrangements?

M: So, of course in those days the FBI was...

A: All over the place.

M: ...had gone through

A: [Our parents] didn't sell anything, did they?

M: No. We stored everything. Most of it. In the house.

S: How long did you have?

M: That was, what

A: Papa locked it all in that one upstairs room...that was like that office, but it didn't stay locked.

M: No, it was ransacked.

A: Everything was gone, everything was gone.

M: Although. The WRA arranged to have...

A: Radios, and...

M: ...trunk shipped to us. They arranged it when you put in for that...to have...they went to your house and they sent...a lot of the stuff was gone, but then...that's why we have some of the things that we couldn't carry, still to this day.

A: I was thinking about the pictures...

M: Lost some of the pictures, though, and then my high school diploma and stuff like that.

A: Didn't Papa come back to Richmond to take care of some things when we were in camp, or did he...

M: I don't think so. There were representatives...when we went to Half Moon Bay, he got permission to go to Richmond to sign contracts or something for rental of the property, but they [the agreements] didn't last very long. This one guy from UC Ag[riculture] or something was going to grow orchids in the greenhouses. Well, that was just kind of...

A: Flash in the pan?

M: Willoughby. Somebody Willoughby. And then they arranged for this Chinese man to rent the place and grow vegetables...have his son grow vegetables there so he could dodge the draft. It was agriculture. But that didn't last.

A: I thought the Chinese fellow rented the whole house out to these ship-builder workers.

M: Well, after they left, somebody just took over [the property]. We don't know [who]. Mrs Soldaggi, the Italian grocery lady down the street, said that there were all kinds of people living in there in the house, and these were people that never wore shoes...

A: OK, I'm thinking of something here [pauses the film]. I remember when they got the...all this was going on...that Mama took her sashimi knife, and remember her breaking it in half, and she buried it. She buried some other things. Did she bury the butsudon thing?

M: She burned the shrine, the Buddhist shrine, which is to them very...

A: Holy.

M: Yah...because she thought that if the FBI came and saw that they would take Papa away to camp like [had been done with] other people...

A: Because they'd been taken away.

S: Wait, this is before [the relocation to] camp?

A: Yah. This is out of fear...

M: ...and records, too.

A: Yah, like they're doing [in the movie]...

S: After Pearl Harbor but before the camp.

A: Before 9066. She burned the butsudon, but she buried several things. I can't remember all of them, but I remember the knife, because it was long, like a weapon.

M: And we had records of Japanese...they're patriotic songs, you know...

A: I remember we used to sing them when we were doing flowers!

S: You broke all the records.

M: Yah.

A: Japanese records.

S: But that was before [camp]...

M: But after the war, I bought some more. I have some old, you know, popular songs. I still have 'em, and I want to play them, but I have nothing to play them on. They're 78s...

A: When they [in the movie, were breaking records], I remember she was crying.

S: But I thought that you and Auntie Junko and Ba and Ji [Shira's grandmother, grandfather] and your grandfather left before you and Meriko went. You all went [to camp] together?

A: No. Just Auntie Junko was the only one who went with Mama and Papa [and grandfather].

S: Right. And they you two went later.

M: She [Junko] was still going to high school.

S: And then you two went later.

M: Yah.

S: Why was that?

A: We took care of the business. Remember in The War [Ken Burns' film] I said that...all the holidays...I didn't say it on this one, on my tape I remember saying Easter was coming...Valentine's Day—February, and then I...all the holidays that follow—Easter, Mother's Day, St Patrick's Day—when we sold the most flowers, that was when...

S: They let you stay.

A: Yah, and we harvested them with the help of our workers.

S: But they let you stay.

M: It wasn't illegal.

S: Oh, OK.

A: Yah, we were able to stay...

M: The aliens [non-citizens] had to leave.

A: I forget the deadline, but we went to Half Moon Bay, I mean Montara.

M: When we went to Tanforan—about May?

A: Well, we went to Tanforan in May but we stayed [before that] with the Takahashis for a couple of months...because we got our flu shots and all...

M: We had some Nisei fellows working for us, they were single guys, and they helped us through that. They said, Don't worry, we'll take care of the rest, or something. We lost touch...

A: One of the guys had a real big crush on Auntie Meriko...before he went off to the Army.

S: Were there any caucasians in camp?

M: Yah, a few. [voice from movie, as the family goes to camp, says "We don't know where we're going..."]

S: Is that true?

M: Yah.

A: And there were soldiers, too.

M: MPs all over the place.

M: Where did we board the train? I forget.

A: At Tanforan. We went on the bus from Tanforan to the train station.

M: We went over the Sierra Nevadas during the night with the shades all pulled.

A: I don't remember what we ate or how we went to the bathroom or anything on that train. I just remember it was the longest ride of my life.

S: You didn't know where you were going, right?

A: It was just so sooty, too. They were coal cars, run by coal. Everything was black.

S: Japanese-Americans swear?

M: Of course!

A: The guys did, for sure.

M: Father used to say: ...

A: He used to say some pretty bad words, but he didn't know what they meant!

M: When he was unhappy.

A: Oh, the horse stalls.

M: Santa Anita, I guess.

A: They're clearing it away as [the Japanese] come. That's a little far-fetched. They had [ours] painted, but they were still...

M: They were white-washed, but it was a very poor job, they smelled, just quick...

S: Well, it was done very fast. And you can't get that smell out of everything.

M: No. They weren't that concerned about us, anyhow.

S: Did they check all your bags?

M: I think so. We had to check our cameras and short-wave radios at the police station [before going to camp]. They gave us a receipt so we could claim them when we got back.

S: [laughs]

M: And they were there.

S: Oh really!

M: In Richmond, anyhow.

S: [watching scene in movie] It wasn't that bad, was it?

A: No, they had planks. They had put down board planks, white-washed the sides [of the stalls].

M: We didn't live in those [stalls]. We were fortunate.

A: We got new barracks.

M: They were air-conditioned, natural air-conditioning.

A: There were cracks this big between the, you know...

S: They were thrown together.

A: The tops were all open so we could hear the Hitomi—what was his name? The baby was Hitomi.

M: Off the bay, we got all the fog, and the cold air would come up through the floor-boards.

A: [watching scene in movie] Notice she has a badge on her. A number.

M: A number. We all got numbers.

A: 20936?

S: They gave you a number?

M: They were family numbers. I still have my first paycheck.

M: I have Papa's—the pink one from the camp. I have a few of those things.

A: In Tanforan, the horse stalls were on one side, and they built the barracks on the other side. Each one had a mess hall, a bath, and shower.

M: Now it's a shopping center, but they have a memorial or something or other to signify about the assembly center.

S: Did they finger-print you?

M: I don't remember.

A: I don't remember either, but probably.

M: Dust, dust, dust, dust, dust.

S: Was it like that?

A: Yah, the barracks.

S: Is this story pretty accurate, the way the barracks was?

A: That's the way the barracks was.

M: Yah. This is at the relocation, not the assembly center; where we permanently had to go.

M: I worked in the mess hall. I poured tea.

S: [watching scene in movie] Is that was it was like?

M: Well, it wasn't...

A: Not quite that bad. Depends on the camp, I guess.

A: They're making more netting...

M: What do you call that?

A: Chicken ranch. Papa worked in the pig farm, too, didn't he?

M: Was it the pig? I thought it was the turkey farm.

A: Oh, the turkey farm.

M: Then they used to go out, past the..., and get jackrabbits, and make sukiyaki. And drink home-made sake.

S: Were there a lot of lines in camp?

M: Yah.

A: Lots of lines.

S: [watching a scene of fighting] Was there a lot of fighting in camp?

A: I guess so. I don't know how much.

M: Well, Manzanar there was, I heard. There were some trouble-makers, resistance...

A: This [scene] is probably leading up to that. [In the film, the family father comes into camp]

S: Where was he?

A: Special camp, FBI.

S: Did you kiss your dad?

M: No, I never kissed him. Usually, you don't do much kissing.

A: Japanese are not [demonstrative]...they suppress their emotions.

M: You bow to each other.

S: Did you go to dances?

M: I didn't but...

A: I did.

M: They used to have talent shows.

S: How often did they have these dances?

A: Every week.

M: They had movies, too.

A: They had talented bands and things, plus dad knew some of the people who who played, like Mabel Sukiyaama was the pianist for the Club Aces? I forget the name of the group. Yah, they'd have dances in the recreation hall.

M: Sacramento had quite a few talented...

A: And then we had a big Valentine's Dance and I was MC. Remember that one, Meriko? We had a club called...We put on a big dance, and I had to go arrange for the band and...that was an assignment by our group. We made the favors and everything. And dance cards. That was our club. I'll show you. I've got it somewhere.

M: You'd think I'd have some memory of it.

M: [watching scene of violence] This must be Manzanar, what do you think?

A: Yah. [riot scenes unsue]

A: Ah, JACL.

M: JACL got involved because...

A: Yah, because they were the ones who said we should go to camp, be docile, and do what they tell us to do.

M: And then they encouraged joining the military, too, right?

A: Yah.

M: To prove the loyalty.

A: Right.

S: So, there were actually dissenters...

M: Yah. Because the ones who resented being a citizen and being put into camp and treated like dirt. Well, it wasn't that bad but they felt like it was. Ah, this was that group. They went to Tule Lake, this bunch.

S: There was a group like that [in the movie]?

A: Yah.

M: The no-no group.

A: They were called disloyal. They did that on the principle. They were really right. It took guts.

M: And there were conscientious objecters who went to jail.

M: But our camp was pretty peaceful.

S: But they weren't really Japanese asking to go to Japan.

A: No, they were protesting. Well, some of them might have been. A lot of Kibei.

M: ...that were raised in Japan and came over...especially while Japan was winning the war..you know how you stick up for the winning side

S: They sent some of the Japanese back to Japan, is that right?

A: They repatriated.

S: How did they do that? They'd never been there.

M: The Gripsholm...

A: It was the prisoner of war exchange, I think.

M: The Swedish ship Gripsholm was used to transfer. They're a neutral country. [commenting on the presence of a Nisei soldier in camp]

A: Uncle Tim [Tokuno] visited [Topaz]. [voice from movie says "\$14"]

A: \$14?

M: I got \$12.

A: I got \$19.

M: That was [for] professional people. Doctors, etc.

A: But as a nurse's aid I got...

M: If you worked in the mess hall, you got \$12.

A: And what was the next one—\$16, eh? I got \$16 as a nurse, and \$19 working in the office.

S: Girls had to [...] too?

M: I guess everybody.

S: Did you?

M: Yah.

M: I guess we were lucky we didn't have brothers.

M: Oh, there's the pig farm! I have pictures of the pig farm.

A: Yah, you went there with—what's her name? Was it Sue?

M: Yamane, Toyoko, and Sumi Adachi?

A: We had a regular hospital building.

S: Did you have a Buddhist shrine in your camp?

M: Some people, I guess, did.

A: We sat on the floor in our recreation hall to watch movies...we took our blankets, and our bottom would get so sore.

A: ...who that man is, but he's going to get shot. Do you remember there was

that one man who got shot?

M: At Topaz. He didn't hear the command, and the MPs shot him dead. He was too close to the fence.

A: And he was hard-of-hearing.

S: What happened to those people who were sent to Japan?

A: They were miserable. They were not accepted in Japan either.

M: Many of them came back again. Especially the ones that didn't speak much Japanese...and to be thrown...Japan wasn't in very good condition. They didn't have enough food, housing.

S: Is that how people left [when the camps were closed] in trucks individually, they weren't in a train?

M: Well, we don't know because we weren't there.

A: How did Papa and Mama get home?

M: I don't know.

A: They must have provided...they gave us some money when we left camp [in 1944].

M: Yah, we missed a lot of that because we were in Rochester, NY with Junko. And Asako was in St Paul.

A: I'll never forget when that peace was declared. Post-film discussion

S: Did many Nisei marry caucasians? Was that very common.

M: Not like these days.

S: How many of your friends?

A: I don't know any except [Fred] Korematsu [1919-2005]. He was a test [law] case. Of the constitutionality of the internment. He didn't go to camp, he went to jail. He and two other guys, but he was the one with a hakujiin [=white] wife.

M: But according to some people I know who knew him, didn't think he should have been set up as a hero like they did. They don't feel he deserved it.

A: Nisei have a lot of prejudices.

S: Did you ever think about trying?

M: Heavens no! We were peaceful, and we were taught to obey...

A: We had no women's rights, no group of any kind...JaCL was kind of our spokesperson

S: The movie alludes to leaving the camp to work on neighboring farms...

A: The WRA was the authority...

S: Right, but they organized...Dad [=Shiro Tokuno] worked for them for a while, right?

A: Your dad worked in Washington, DC.

S: Right, that's what I'm saying. That you guys got out of camp. Auntie Junko went to school [in Rochester, NY], and the Pew family.

M: I don't know who was behind all that. Well, the scholarships were the American Friends Society, Quakers did a lot of good work helping people get scholarships.

A: First thing they did was contact...



S: So, the AFS immediately started trying to help...

M: Already when the war started, they were set up. That's the kind of work they did.

A: But Junko's scholarship, I'm sure Newton Ta... put in to the Friends committee, because he was her teacher, and I don't think they would have just found her [on their own].

S: But when did they start actually...

A: Letting us out?

S: Yes, how did that go about? Because that was not right away.

A: No, it was after the ... And then..Although, students were going out very early.

M: They had clearances. Did background checks.

A: ...and students, and usually someone would vouch for them [going somewhere in the Midwest]. Some companies would need workers. There was one frozen food place back East that hired a lot of Japanese. What was the name of that...?

M: Seabrook..Bird's Eye frozen foods. There were lots of people from camp who went, and they were settled in that Seabrook area [New Jersey]. They were treated very well, but they worked hard.

A: They were housed. That was the big problem. They had no money, they couldn't rent any place, but the companies like that would provide the housing...

M: When we left [1944], we were cleared to go out of Topaz to Rochester, NY, they gave us a ticket to where we were going, and \$25 in cash.

S: How did you decide to even leave?

A: Auntie Junko got a scholarship. Now go back a bit. Mom got a letter from American Friends, and they said "You [Asako] were a student [at Berkeley], and we'd like to place you in a university somewhere, and they found three different schools. One was Drake University, I just remember that one, and [Shiro] said, Go there, because it would be closest to Minnesota—in Iowa?

M: I think Kaz Kato went to Drake

A: Anyway, there were three schools they had selected for me, and I was excited about it, and Mama said, "No way!" All these stories she was hearing rumors about girls getting beaten up and mob violence. And I knew a lot of friends who weren't getting hurt but I couldn't argue with her. Then when Auntie Junko got her scholarship, the atmosphere was much better because the US was now making headway with the war.

S: When was it that you were going to be able to go to Drake?

A: Almost as soon as I went to camp [1942]. Very early on.

M: But when we eventually left, it was 1944.

S: Wait. But it couldn't have been that early on.

A: Yes, it was.

S: But you didn't meet [Shiro] until later—1943.

A: Yes, the year after we were in Topaz.

S: You said you met [Shiro] at the end of summer 1943. [misc ruminations]

A: We [with Meriko] were in Topaz from September 1942. Shiro came into camp in August or September 1943. We went to the New Year's dance in 1944. [Maintains her contention that she could have left in 1942. The idea that Shiro argued for her trip to Drake is dropped.]

M: So Mama said that if the three of us go together, but just Junko by herself, never.

A: But it was too good to pass up that scholarship. Papa saw that.

M: So she got the scholarship to University of Rochester, School of Music. Then there was the WRA office. I'll never forget. We stopped in Chicago, it was July, hot, hot, hot, muggy. We stayed at the YMCA hotel, no air conditioning. That was the most miserable...

A: And I bought a pair of shoes at Carson Perry Scott.

M: Then we left the YMCA hotel, and it was arranged that we got on the New York Central and get off at Rochester. We went to the YWCA, where we stayed, and there was the WRA representative. Was that Miwa?

A: Claude C Cornwall, she worked for him.

M: Our [current] friend Miwa, with whom we became good friends.

S: Oh, you met her there?

M: She was working for the WRA at that time. So then people would put in for—they wanted maids and cooks, mostly. So there was this opening, a family named DePew, and they wanted a cook and a babysitter for one of the children, the youngest. And then there was this other—Remington—family for a big-shot lawyer, in more or less the same area where we were going to be, and they placed [Junko] there.

A: Meriko was the cook for the DePews, and I watched Charlie, and I got a job.

S: But Auntie Junko—you were all staying together?

M: No, these were two different [families]—DePew and Remington.

A: They couldn't put us in one place.

S: Junko was with the Remingtons?

M: Yah.

A: And then Claude Cornwall tried really hard to get me, he wanted me to be in the public eye, so he wanted me to work in the department store.

[[photo of Cornwall](#); [collection of WRA photographs](#) ]

But that didn't pan out, so I ended up getting my own job.

[discussion shows they did not often see sister Junko in Rochester]

[Junko's scholarship was just for a year; see also, [Kiyo's Story](#); very similar]

A: Did she get paid for work at the Remington's?

M: She must have got some spending money. Room and board, plus...

S: And she did what there?

A: I don't know.

M: There was a daughter but she didn't need babysitting.

S: So you both just lived there about a year?

A: Meriko was there longer. I left in December 1944.

M: And I stayed there until the war ended.

S: When did your parents get out of the camp?

M: When the war ended. About the same time.

A: The war ended, and then [the camps closed].

[discussion of actual time spent in Topaz; being young, the sisters made the best of it]

S: What was the living situation for the family at Topaz?

M: Well, there was this one big room, and grandfather and us five, and we had to hang blankets to make divisions so that you could kind of have privacy. And then we had these cots, like, to sleep on, and a potbelly stove 'cause it was pretty cold in the winter.

A: With the coal. We had to haul coal.

M: One of the worst things was the dust storms. It would sift through the walls, all gritty

A: In your hair...

M: And another thing was that there was a central mess hall, a central shower, so we'd have to go from, you know. It was made into blocks.

S: Albert [Tokuno 1935-2008] ..

A: I remember him. I used to go to [Shiro's] dining hall, and he was this nine-year-old kid, so cute.

M: Spoiled brat!

A: And I saw him taking food. Especially when grandma was out, she was helping Caroline with the baby. Aunt Tei was living in Ogden, UT. December 1942 was when Caroline was born, and grandma was gone [from camp] for at least two or three weeks to help, and Albert was the only...Uncle Tony—was not going to be waited on by anybody! So Albert would bring home the food for [??]

M: Where was Mary?

A: Mary was working with Tony out in the onion fields. A lot of the time, Albert was the only one home with [??]. Right, but when grandma was there she probably did get the food for her honored grandson!

S: So then you, Auntie Meriko, came back to Richmond? What was the situation when you got back there?

M: Mama and Papa were home first, well, with grandfather. And the place was a mess. The people that lived there didn't give a darn, everything was just in shambles.

S: Well, was it in shambles in the sense that they were just slob or was it intentional damage?

M: No, I don't think so. Ignorant people.

A: Was there glass in the windows?

M: I think so.

A: You said there was glass broken all over.

M: Well, the greenhouse glass. These people were so barbarian that Mama said where there was a space in the back by the packing shed—where carnation ends were thrown to make compost, she said that area was filled with toilet paper that had been used. Apparently, they thought the toilets

were great places to keep celery, etc, fresh [so they used the outdoor space for a toilet].

S: So these were squatters.

M: I guess they worked in the shipyards. Kaiser had...

S: So they came as part of the war effort.

M: Yah, at least 100,000. They built the Liberty Ships in Richmond. So Kaiser was the main business there.

A: That was in [Ken Burns'] The War.

M: Someone had taken charge [of the property] and was renting rooms to people.

S: How did [your folks] clean everything up?

A: There was nothing in the greenhouses. They found mattresses in the greenhouses. Even when I went back there.

S: So, basically, they had to start all over.

M: Yah. At least they had the property. A lot of people had nothing to go back to.

A: Because Papa paid the taxes.

M: So we had some people stay in the little house in the back.

A: The Tokunos! [her new relatives by marriage]

M: Yah, Tei and them stayed there for a while.

A: And Grandma Tokuno and Tony lived there.

M: And Memi Nagase and her father lived there [before the war].

A: I came back at Thanksgiving 1945, because [Shiro's] was overseas.

M: Is that when Henry and them drove over?

A: Yes, without stopping [from Minnesota]. It was amazing to see the Bay Area lights as we came down from the mountains.

S: You came with [Shiro]?

A: With Henry and four other guy friends of his. My talking kept them awake.

S: So you didn't see your husband again until 1947?

A: Yah, New Year 1947.

M: There wasn't a lot of nursery work, so I went to do housework for families up in the hills.

A: Gee, I didn't know that about you.

S: Why not? Where were you?

A: I don't know. Where was I? I worked for IRS in San Francisco every day. Junko worked for Social Security in San Francisco, but I don't think we got together [during the day]. I remember coming back [home] together.

S: So you were living at home.

A: Yah.

M: I would just go for four hours in the morning.

A: She was always home when I got home.

M: I must have gone by bus, because I didn't drive until I was 25.

A: Oh, you got that green Buick. I remember you sent me a picture.

M: Kiyoko taught me how to drive. One day she took me to a parking lot way

out near Ft Richmond, and she told me what to do.

A: Didn't they have power steering by then?

M: So I got my license. I drove Kiyoo and Roy and somebody else, and we went to Point Reyes, Marin County, and drove along the ocean. Later, I found out that Roy was holding his breath the whole way [revisiting the purpose of the recording]

S: I didn't know that you guys got paid in camp.

A: \$16 as a nurse, and \$19 for professional stuff.

S: Caucasians worked there too?

A: Yes, I worked with Melvin Rantala.

M: The caucasians were the administrators of the camp. Each block had a block manager chosen from the population. And some teachers were caucasians. There were some excellent teachers, but then there were those who were just out of school.

S: How many people in Topaz?

A: 10,000. Most camps had 10,000.

M: Junko graduated from Topaz High.

A: We had talented artists. Like Chiura Obata (1885-1975).

S: And churches, too?

M: All services were in the rec hall. And there was a PX-like facility, a canteen, where you could buy little necessities. But a lot of our shopping was done via Sears catalog.

S: Food was all provided, so when you worked, the money was just for spending...

M: They would give us some kind of allowance. Clothing allowance.

A: \$3.75. And we used to knit a lot. I remember ordering a lot of yarn.

S: The whole time you were in camp, you had no access to radios?

A: We had radios. Short-wave wasn't allowed...

M: But people brought them in. And cameras. David Tatsuno of San Jose, for example. He documented all kinds of camp life.