

GUEST: TAKESHI YOSHIHARA: A QUIET STRUGGLE

LSS 711 (LENGTH: 25:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 12/10/13

I like to say that there was this great injustice to me, but on the other hand, what the country has meant to me, the opportunities that were offered to me, far outweigh the injustice.

For three years, Takeshi Yoshihara and his family lived in two small cubicles in a Japanese American internment camp. The experience, while traumatic for the young Takeshi and his family, did not leave him bitter. In fact, this Nisei would grow up to be a U.S. Navy officer, and make history in the process. Takeshi Yoshihara, next on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. More than one hundred ten thousand Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. What was it like to live in these camps? Tonight, Takeshi Yoshihara of Honolulu shares his story, which begins with his father's arrival in American more than a century ago.**

Your father came to the United States when he was a teenager. Why did he come?

I think he came, as so many from that part of Japan came; their economic opportunities were very limited.

What part of Japan was that?

It was called Hiroshima - ken, so it was in the vicinity of Hiroshima. And Japan was having a very difficult time economically, so a large number of Japanese immigrants came during that period in, probably the early 1900s. He arrived in maybe 1905, or somewhere in that time as a teenager. He was one of those recruited to work on a timber mill that was being built in the middle of a forest not far from Seattle, but on the foothills of the Cascade Mountains.

So, when he wanted to get married, what did he do?

Well, on his trip back, he had complained that he needed a wife. And so, while he was there, his father and my mother's father made some kinda deal that they would send a young lady after my father returned to the United States.

And sure enough, a few months later, she arrived by herself on about a fifteen-day journey aboard ship.

So, his parents picked his wife for him?

Oh, yes; oh, yes. And they were from a neighboring family.

Well, what was your life like as a boy in the sawmill camp?

Well, I came along as the fourth child in a family that was to grow to eight children. My parents were living at that time in a small village. I'm not sure I would call it a village. They called it a camp, Japan Camp. I lived there until I was eight years old, but I still remember going to Japanese schools, learning Japanese culture, and especially the values of Japanese that I still remember to this day, and has contributed to my life. And it was a wonderful life. I think all my brothers and sisters look upon that period there as the most stable and happy lives, beginning lives.

Even though there wasn't much materially.

Nothing materially. We lived in a little old building that people would call a shack now. But as a youngster, it was comfortable and warm, and we enjoyed it.

But it wouldn't last. The Great Depression hit, and the sawmill closed down. Takeshi Yoshihara's family was forced to find a new home, and a new way of life. Not easy for a family from a foreign country who could speak little English at the time.

My father had a neighbor from Japan who was farming a strawberry farm in Oregon. He and his wife had done very well, and they lived in what we considered a very fine home. Through their compassion and kindness, they invited my whole family of eight to live in their home. And there were two of them, and eight of us, so we kinda took over their home for a year. And he offered my parents both to work on the strawberry farm, and that continued for about a year until my father, his friend's encouragement, thought it was a good time to start his own strawberry farm. And that's what he did. Now, the home we lived in, and I can remember this very clearly because first thing one noticed is weeds growing out of the floor. Over the years, the land had shifted, and the roof leaked, and there was no water or plumbing.

Definitely a fixer - upper. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] Fixer - upper would -- not much to do to ...

So, it was a property that probably nobody else wanted, and your dad --

Oh, it was an absolutely abandoned house. And I remember, to contain the leaking roof, we got these big vegetable cans of tomatoes or something, gallon cans, and we'd put it wherever it rained. And that was our --

And walked around the cans.

[CHUCKLE]

I've done that. [CHUCKLE]

That's right; you did that as well.

[CHUCKLE] But not with weeds growing up out of the floorboards.

We didn't have water, we didn't have sewage, or we didn't even have electricity. So, we had a kerosene lamp, and ...

How did you keep warm?

Well, we had blankets, so we kept warm all right. And stoves with plenty of wood to heat up the stove. They had a wood stove.

Strawberries take two years to grow. During that time, Takeshi Yoshihara's family wouldn't make much money, but the family was willing to make the sacrifice to become successful farmers. Then, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and America joined the Second World War.

It was really a shocking incident for them. And of course, your reaction is, what's gonna happen to us? They were aliens in the United States. Of course, we who were born were American citizens. They feared for a time that they would be picked up and put into prisoner of war camps. And then, I remember we got visits from the local FBI and the police. And here, they knew nothing; they could hardly speak English, and were just doing their business, but they felt intimidated. And then, there was a curfew that came along, and they were restricted from going anywhere. So, it was a heightened and stressful time for them.

Could you feel your parents' fear?

I could always feel their fear, very definitely. I could feel their disappointment. But I never felt their despair. First of all, they were virtually in survival mode without income, working hard, and their concerns were primarily keeping alive. I mean, feeding their children, having shelter for them, sending their children with clothes to school.

Because those two years had been so very hard.

Very, very difficult years.

But you'd think they'd say, Oh, now what? How can this get worse? But you said they didn't feel this way.

Well, when that notice came, they weren't prepared to abandon the farm. Even through Pearl Harbor and all, they had worked dawn to dusk, tried to keep up the farm, not knowing what's going to happen. But when that notice appeared on that telephone pole, they realized that this was it, there's no alternative, they've got to leave the farm.

It was a heartbreaking decision. Takeshi Yoshihara's father found a friend from church who agreed to run their farm and pay off their debts. The family was then sent to a relocation camp in Portland, Oregon.

They had taken two - by - fours and just built cubicles throughout this large pavilion area with very high ceilings, and used canvas as a doorway for the opening. So, if one were to look upon what we called our assembly center, it

LONG STORY SHORT WITH LESLIE WILCOX (GUEST: TAKESHI YOSHIHARA: A QUIET STRUGGLE)

would be looking down from the ceiling and seeing all the open ceiling area, but it would look like an egg crate, and you could see maybe twenty, thirty families in each. And every family was given one little cubicle.

Now, could you look over the wall and see the next family?

If we stood on our beds, we could look over the family and see them fighting or having a good time, or whatever.

So, there was no audio privacy, no visual privacy if anyone who wanted to look.

That's right. And especially in a situation like that, it would be surprising how noisy the night times were. All kinds of noises; people arguing, playing, that sort of thing. So, it was very ... there was not much privacy. Then they had an area where we lined up to eat in shifts on picnic benches. But it was supposedly for a short time, so we endured it. The worst part was, right next to this exposition center was large stock butchering facility. Just next to it.

In operation?

In operation.

A slaughterhouse?

Slaughterhouse; that's the word I'm thinking about, a slaughterhouse. And we could sense the effects of all the slaughters going on, especially when the wind blew in our direction. It was almost nauseating; it was so bad. And that was combined with one of the hottest summers in Portland. And Portland can get very hot and humid, and without ventilation, it was just suffocating. The authorities were telling us, Well, we're putting you in here to protect you. And some of the in -- I say inmates, but internees [CHUCKLE] looked up and said, How come the rifles are pointing at us instead of the other way if they're protecting us? So, they changed the name assembly center, I don't know if for that reason, but we never used it again. It became a relocation center.

Relocation; when we say that today or we say internment camps, there's a significant minority of people who will correct you and say, You know what, let's call it for what it is, that's a euphemism, it was a concentration camp. What's your feeling about that terminology?

I've looked up the word concentration camps, and technically, concentration camps is correct. As I understand, concentration camps is a place where people are imprisoned, not because of what they do, like crimes, but because who they are. And we, of course, were all homogeneous Japanese blood. So, in that sense, concentration camp is the correct term. But from my own perspective, and my deep appreciation for my country and what it has meant to me, I hesitate, because if I were to say it, I would feel like I'm getting close to a Nazi concentration camp. We were not treated unfairly. There was a lot of compassion, understanding by the authorities.

So, day - by - day, you were treated well, but did you think it was the right thing to do to bring people together like that, for that reason?

As a youngster, I didn't think much about that. My parents didn't really think much about that, because, here again, it's the perspective of my family who were really in survival mode, being relieved in a sense. Have all our meals

provided, have a good roof over us. So, the word they used so often was “*shikata ga nai*”, which means, it can’t be helped. And that was their attitude. **So, accept it.**

To accept it, and do the best they can with it.

Takeshi Yoshihara and his family stayed at the relocation camp in Portland for four months. By then, they were ready to leave because of the stench and cramped conditions. This time, the family was forced to take a train to a more permanent internment camp in Idaho called Minidoka.

They had built this camp for ten thousand people to house them with all the facilities, all the utilities, and the main buildings were like Army barracks. They were very, very hastily constructed of wood framing, and covered with black tar paper. You could almost see holes through some of our walls. The floors were bare wood panels, and a little potbelly stove sat in the middle of the room to provide heat. So, when we got there, I remember we were issued canvas -- I guess they call them ticking, where you stuff straw in to make mattresses out of. And we were all given a satchel bag and taken to a place with a big pile of straw, and made our own mattress and returned to our assigned rooms, where there was a canvas cot. And that was our house for the next three years.

One room for a family of eight?

No; I think it was family of six children and below, it was one family; one room per family. We had eight children, and we just couldn’t physically fit into one - family, so we were given two families. And I think we were kind of the privileged families in the camp, because we had two. Everybody we knew had one room, and we had two rooms, and so my parents lined up ... let’s see, seven cots in this one row for all my brothers and sisters. And they had one infant, so they took the other room and put the infant with them. And no chairs, no furniture, not else; just a place to sleep.

And was there a cafeteria? Nobody cooked without a stove, I take it.

That’s right. In addition to the barracks, they had ... well, the barracks were arranged in blocks for about two hundred and fifty people in a block. And within that block, they had built a central mess hall, and washing facilities, and toilet and shower facilities where we all used it together.

How did that work, exactly?

Well, as a teenager, it was one of the most sensitive time of my life, privacy especially.

I think you were in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades while you were in camp?

That’s right; sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. And I remember being so shy about using the facilities, because both the showers and the toilet facilities were all lined in a row, with no partition between them.

Men and women in different facilities?

In different facilities, but --

But no stalls for toilets.

No stalls; no stalls for toilets. And so, sometimes I would get up like three o'clock in the morning, just worrying about whether anybody would be there with me. [CHUCKLE] But that never went away. I felt very, very humiliated. And I would have preferred at that time, those years, going back to that survival mode where we had an outhouse; one whole outhouse. I would rather have had that than the modern toilet facilities we had in camp.

What was day - to - day life like?

Well, I always have to compare it with how it was before. Before, we were in survival mode, working on a farm, walking to school each day. No friends; just hard work. All of a sudden, we're in this community of ten thousand people, lots of kids my age. And it wasn't long before the new normal took hold. And the new normal meant lots of play friends. You don't have much to play with, but if you get a ball or football, a lot of good times. I didn't feel like a minority in camp. The new normal took on a life of its own, because the camps were designed for all the residents to find some employment, and everybody who wanted to work found some employment. My father became a garbage collector, and my mother worked as a helping hand in the central mess hall.

So, the internment camp would pay federal wages?

I'm not sure federal wages; they got sixteen dollars a month. Doctors got nineteen dollars a month.

Woo - hoo. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] So they were the upper class in camp. But they were mostly paid sixteen dollars a month; that was the going rate. And that's like fifty cents a day.

So, was there a Minidoka School?

Well, when we went there, of course, ten thousand people arrived suddenly. They had built all these barracks. The first question was, Where will be put the children in school? And the only answer was, in the barracks rooms. No blackboards, just one room. Of course, the next thing they had to do was find teachers. Where are they going to find teachers? Some were teachers already in their professions, but certainly nowhere near the number needed. So, if one had a high school diploma, he or she became eligible to teach elementary school. And I think that was the case when I first went there. A young girl, I'm sure she was just a high school graduate, but taught, and taught very well. And I don't regret in any way the quality of the education I received, even under those circumstances.

When the war ended in 1945, Takeshi Yoshihara's family was grateful they were finally leaving the internment camp, but also anxious. They'd lost everything before, and once again, they had to start over and create a new life from scratch.

With my family of eight children, that was an army to take care of, and I know my parents worried a lot about it, where should they go. But one day, they heard from a church in Seattle that offered to make their basement spaces

available for us, and they would take care of us and shelter us, and feed us until something better came along. So, we happily accepted. That resolved my parents' survivor fears, I should say. And, so they accepted, and everybody received a train ticket or bus ticket, and twenty - five dollars per person spending money.

Even your infant brother?

Absolutely everybody; everybody that breathed got twenty-five dollars. Which we thought was very generous at that time. And so, with that, I forget, I think we took a train to Seattle, and the people at the church were there to greet us and to take us to their church. And it was a wonderful beginning, and I consider it a blessing from God that He interceded and found a place where we could start a new beginning.

A month later, the Yoshihara family found a place to live in Renton, Washington. And though there was anti - Japanese sentiment in the post - war United States, Takeshi says the family never felt discriminated against, not by neighbors or his classmates when he started high school.

How was your first day in school?

First day in school; well, of course, I had a lot of reservations walking into that school. But, I think the principal and the superintendent, and the authorities had done a marvelous job preparing for my classmates to receive me. And I was just amazed at how welcoming they were to me. But all of a sudden, I was going from a place of ten thousand others that looked like me, to a place where nobody looked like me. There were only, I think, two other Asians in my high school class; everybody else was Caucasian. So, of course, I felt being a minority again, and a minority of one is a very small minority.

Feeling as though he didn't quite fit in, Takeshi Yoshihara struggled to make friends in high school. Without much of a social life, he focused on academics, and that paid off. After graduation, he would go on to become the first Japanese American admitted into the U.S. Naval Academy, and have a successful career in the U.S. Navy, where his nickname was "Tak". Mahalo to Takeshi "Tak" Yoshihara for sharing his story. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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And how was your school experience at Annapolis as the first and only Asian in the class?

Well, it was more than that, because here, I had come from a family ... well, we were at the chopstick stage, for eating, and all of a sudden you go there.

Formal dining table, linen covered white tablecloths, and all the utensils out. All of them. And I'm looking at it, and looking to the side, left and right, and figuring out what's the proper utensil to use.

You didn't have computers in those days, so you couldn't do a Wiki How.

[CHUCKLE]

That's right.

Which one is which?

That's right.