

Toyo S. Kawakami
30 Orchard Lane
Columbus, Ohio 43214

Hyphenated American

When Dr. Bailey asked me to speak of my growing up American with a distinct cultural difference, I had to take a long look backwards. I first thought: I cannot even begin by quoting A.E. Housman's "When I was one and twenty", since that age was, for me, ^afive decades ago. I then remembered from an interview with Penny Moore, of Italian descent, a reporter then for WNCI, that she referred to ourselves as Hyphenated Americans. That is, we qualified our being Americans as Italian-American and Japanese-American.

So speaking of myself as a hyphenated American, I am aware that the term Japanese states my racial origin and American ^{substantiates} the fact that I am a citizen, by birth, of this country. In more ways than one, I do believe that I am more American than my physical features indicate.

I was born a Nisei, second generation Japanese, in California. Our parents were the Issei, first generation. The Japanese are the only minority group that distinguishes the generations numerically, and now there are the Sansei, third generation, and the Yonsei, fourth. I grew up in Sacramento, the state capitol, through the so-called Roaring Twenties, the flapper age, the great depression, and the pre-World War II stretch of peace. When very young, I did not realize that the role of the orientals in this country began ten years before the American Civil War, and the Japanese immigrants started coming to the West Coast about 1890, mainly to seek a livelihood in a land of promise. Little did I know then that anti-oriental attitudes dominated West Coast politics and would later affect the course of national affairs.

The ethnic community where I grew up comprised my world, limited to an area towards the river by housing restrictions, but colorful and interesting. Because so many who lived here were Japanese, this section of Saramento was known as Nihonmachi, or Japanese town. I suppose a stranger strolling along the streets would have felt transported to a foreign village. For here there were not just houses with pretty gardens, but also small hotels, some boarding houses for migrant Japanese workers who followed the crops at harvesting up and down the state, a drug store where I was often sent to get certain Japanese remedies as well as prescribed medicines, hardware stores that stocked Japanese cutlery and bamboo utensils along with U.S.-made tools, dry goods stores that carried Japanese cosmetics as well as American clothes and fabrics, Japanese restaurants and confectionery shops, shoe stores, a fresh fish market where I would be fascinated to see an octopus suspended from a ceiling rack and large tuna and sea bass packed in ice. Oddly enough, the meat markets were owned and managed by the Chinese. There was even a hospital, staffed entirely by Japanese professionsls. In this area was represented Japanese from all walks of life, as in the childhood rhyme of "Doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief. . . ."

It seemed natural to hear Japanese spoken all around me every day. Although many of my school friends went to a Japanese language ^{at} the Buddhist temple after daytime elementary classes, Father had decided that his children would not, so as to speak unaccented English. Mother spoke Japanese to us, with a smattering of English words, but she really understood far more of our English and slang than she cared to admit. Father spoke English to us constantly because of expediency and,

when necessary, would interpret for us. To circumvent Mother's eavesdropping, we children sometimes resorted to speaking pig-Latin. But when she heard "amamay" repeated in our conversation, she would simply remark: "So you are talking about me again."

Even as a child, I think I knew that my parents' background differed from that of many other families. Both Mother and Father were well-educated, both from Samurai families. Mother had finished normal school, equivalent to a teachers' college today, and had taught a while in Japan. She came to this country with the status of teacher. Father did not come as a laborer, but as a student when he was in his late teens. He went through high school for the second time to learn English, and went on to the University of Nevada to major in mining engineering, then to the University of California in Berkeley. She had remained in Japan until he sent for her, and they were married in California - after an engagement of ten years.

Because of their deep interest in reading, I grew up surrounded by books. Japanese schoolmates thought it rather unusual that our family had a set of encyclopedia, the Harvard Classics, dictionaries, children's collections of poetry and prose, novels and reference books. At Christmas, we children received books and toys, but also games that we had to share with one another. The books, however, were our very own. Mother read widely in translation, and it was from her that I first heard about Schopenhauer, Debussy, Chopin, Beethoven, Ibsen, Shakespeare, and others. Father read as much, both in English and Japanese. One summer he read Kathryn Forbes' Mama's Bank Account, and each evening he would give Mother a chapter by chapter rendering in Japanese. She thoroughly enjoyed the story. He followed that book with Gilbreth's Cheaper by the Dozen, and though she relished this narrative of a large family, the story came too close to reality for her, since she had nine children of her own.

I was the first-born of her brood. My three sisters and I were given Japanese names, while our five brothers had American names. In fact, Father was so interested in American history that he named our twin brothers, whom we lost in infancy, Benjamin and Franklin, and our youngest brother was named Lee after a historical personage whom Father admired greatly. Although I was the eldest, my brother William, a year younger than I, was always considered the chonan, the eldest son and heir. You must be wondering what it must have been like to grow up in a bilingual, bicultural setting. It was rough sometimes, since it meant growing up American by schooling and associations outside of the family, even outside of Wihonmachi, yet having to conform to customs, traditions, and behavior considered proper by our parents. I recall, with amusement, an essay that my younger brother Joe wrote about Mother when he was in high school. He described her warm, endearing qualities, but he ended his composition with the sentence, "But she is a hard woman."

Our gentle, but firm, mother must have occasionally despaired of teaching us ideal manners, because she sometimes wryly referred to us children as yabanjin, her barbarians. When I was in junior college, she taught me a lesson in acceptable behavior. I was running late that morning and knew that if I missed the first bus, I could not catch the transfer bus in time for my eight o'clock class. So I gulped down my breakfast, snatched up my books, rushed through the hall, kicked the front door open and was almost out, when I heard Mother call after me, "Will you please come back here a moment?" I yelled, "Mom, I'll miss the bus!" She repeated, in a not-to-be-ignored tone, "Please come back here." So I reluctantly walked back till I faced her. She looked me in the eye for a minute and then said, "You may go now. When you reach the door, open it with your hand and catch it before it slams." Of course, I missed the bus and was late for class.

Our home was always a center of activities, not just for us, but also for the neighborhood children of different nationalities, of Austrian, Italian, Mexican, Chinese, and Black descent. They joined us for play, doing homework together, reading, and for the snacks that Mother always served at ten o'clock in the morning and three o'clock in the afternoon. Our parent's acceptance of our different friends included the celebration of the holidays, American and Japanese -- Girls' Festival Day on March 3rd, Boys' Festival Day on May 5th, Easter, the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, when turkey was not known to many Japanese families, Christmas and New Year's. Each of them was special, but the mention of Christmas evokes, for the child in me, the excitement, anticipation, the joy, the glory of a tall Christmas tree with candles lit at evening. Most Japanese made much more of New Year's in our community. The beginning of the year was celebrated for three days, with unusual foods, receiving of visitors, and exchange of family gifts with close friends, like a small barrel of soy sauce, a 100-pound sack of rice, or a large wooden box of noodles.

There was one celebration, however, that we did not participate in, since we went to a Christian church. The Buddhists observed the Bon Festival, the Festival of the Dead, not sad or mournful, but a happy event that welcomed the spirits of the dead with folk dances, formal performances, and music. The house we lived in was across the street from the Buddhist temple, where the celebration took place in the huge play ground. We could not go to it, but we did watch from our second story windows.

When I was still in the fifth grade, I started to write poetry, encouraged by Mother and my teachers, and I continue to do so to this day. Out of her phenomenal memory, Mother would recite lovely haiku, of 17 syllables, and tanka, with 31 syllables, and she would carefully explain the meaning and the setting of the poems in simple Japanese so I could understand. She herself wrote poetry, and Father painted in oils. So both of them gave me an appreciation of the natural world around me, the turn of the seasons, the wonder of growth and decay, the renewal of each day. Once after a horrible fight with several brothers (it was a losing battle to begin with), Mother found me crying in a corner. She held both sides accountable and did not excuse my action. She said quietly to me, "Why don't you turn your tears into poems?" So poetry has given me an outlet for feelings, a source for comfort in adjusting to tragic distress, and a reason to be myself.

After junior high school, I went to the Sacramento High School, with more than 4000 students. There I had many more hakujin, Caucasian, friends than the Japanese, I suppose, because of interests shared in literature and music and art. At the high school I took journalism in the hopes that I could continue in the field in college. I did feature writing for the school paper and for the school page of a city newspaper. In my journalism class was a personable, aggressive, ~~sometimes~~ brash, young man now well known in California, Herb Caen of the San Francisco Chronicle. I had been a rather timid, shy person, but in journalism, I learned to make appointments with strangers, interview them, and write the stories, in time for deadlines. That reticence and holding back must have come from my upbringing -- bowing, serving, looking after others without being too vocal.

My circle of hakujin friends grew larger in junior college, where, instead of journalism, I began majors in English and Latin. I became an active part of a writing group, the Philographers Club, and I served as the editor of the yearly anthology, which was aptly titled Stars in Their Eyes. We issued 200 copies, mimeographed, since the students could not afford a commercial printer. My patient Father did all 200 covers in old English script by hand with gold ink on black.

Those college years were invigorating, filled with new experiences. At this time, I was beginning to see my work, poetry, essays, weekly columns, short stories, in print, and even now I see myself referred to as a Nisei writer of the 1930's by my maiden name. True, one critic called me "a wailing Barrett", but another much kinder described me as the Nisei Emily Dickinson, which was an overwhelming honor.

I went on to the University of California in Berkeley, Father's alma mater, to continue my studies. Not too long afterwards my entire family moved to Berkeley, and at one time there were five of us enrolled at the university. There was no well-defined Japanese community in Berkeley, though there was a good-sized one across the bay in San Francisco. Since housing restrictions existed against the nonwhites, ours was a rented house about 20 blocks away from the campus, a distance I walked daily. After graduation I was married to a Japanese newspaperman, and with our infant son, we lived in Oakland, the city adjacent to Berkeley. So it was in our Oakland apartment that I heard the grim radio news of the attack on Pearl Harbor the morning of December 7, 1941. I was stunned and soon found out how demoralizing racial hatred, prejudice, and vindictiveness can be for the victims. The consequences of the outbreak of World War II were to leave lasting impact on our lives, and on other Japanese, not only in California, but in Washington, Oregon, and part of Arizona. The immediate result was that my husband and I separated on Christmas Eve, he to return to San Francisco, and I and my child to join my family in Berkeley.

After Pearl Harbor, feelings against all Japanese, citizens and aliens alike, ran high, and the voices of organized interests, politicians, and the press on the West Coast clamored for their deportation or removal. So ten weeks later, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which excluded persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast. The reason given was so-called "military necessity". The government has never fundamentally reviewed whether this massive eviction of an entire ethnic group was justified. At the time the order was given, my brother Roy was serving in the U.S. Army. Only a handful of citizens and organizations -- a few churchmen, a small part of organized labor, the Naval Intelligence, a few others -- spoke out for the rights and interests of the Nisei.

No one knew exactly when our evacuation order would be issued. Everyone was tense, not knowing what to do, how to make preparations and when. But by a series of 108 separate orders, General DeWitt, in command of the West Coast, ordered all Japanese removed from the coastal states. So it was that what was later called "our worst wartime mistake" happened.

On March 2, 1942, the first evacuation areas were named, and on March 10, the Wartime Civilian Control Administration was established to assist in the evacuation. Since no preparation had been made for so huge a mass exodus, fairgrounds and race tracks were commandeered for use as temporary assembly centers, and there were 18 of these. Army engineers constructed primitive barracks to provide temporary quarters for more than 110,000 people.

With others living around the San Francisco region, my family was sent from Berkeley to the Tanforan Race Track in San Bruno, south of San Francisco. In Berkeley the larger families were moved out first, and we learned of this the day before we had to leave from a phone call from my brother Bill who was still teaching bacteriology at the university. With so little time, Mother organized us into work-squads, sorting clothes to take, discarding and repacking what we would have to leave behind. We were permitted to take only what we ourselves could carry, which meant about two pieces of luggage per person. Fortunately, our large collection of

books had already been packed and stored with a Caucasian friend. I called the Salvation Army and the Goodwill Industries to tell them that they could call for clean clothing, household equipment and furniture the next day. Through most of the night, Bill kept a bonfire going in the backyard to burn accumulations of old letters, school mementoes, things that we simply could not take along or leave behind. It was not until we started discarding cherished possessions and watching them go up in flames that I could truly comprehend that we were being moved out -- away from the home we known for so many years, from friends, from familiar surroundings.

From the time we were interned at the race track, we were known by the family number of 13423, and not by our surname. We were assigned to horse-stalls, two because of the size of our family. We had no furniture except for army cots, so we "salvaged" scrap lumber, and Father made stools, of varying heights, and a table. Curfew was imposed, and a roll call was held every day at 6:45 a.m. and 6:45 p.m. The entire assembly center was closely guarded, surrounded by watch towers manned by armed sentries, and searchlights played around the camp at night. We were introduced to communal living here at Tanforan, and so it was to be for the years of our internment. We were at the assembly center for six months, from April on, and then we were moved again, this time to a permanent camp in Utah. There were ten permanent camps, all in desolate wildernesses.

My family, with the exception of Bill who had come ahead with a volunteer sanitary engineering crew weeks before, arrived at the new camp, euphemistically named the Central Utah Relocation Center, on October 3, 1942. He was waiting for us at the intake gate. All I could see was rows and rows of low, black, tarpapered barracks stretching for blocks with no trees, no grass, only the dusty alkali dust swirling around on the ground. At least the barracks were new, but still without furniture, just army cots. The camp was surrounded by a barbed wire fence, and under surveillance constantly by the military police.

Those of us who were able-bodied worked, the professionals, like doctors and teachers, at 19.00 a month, the skilled at 16.00, and the unskilled at 12.00. By working I received a clothing allowance of \$3.75 a month, which was not enough for a child's pair of shoes, unless I saved for several months. I taught in the high school and evening school for adults, and later changed to being a librarian in the camp public library. Though it was a strange contrast to living in California, for here we encountered freezing winters, blizzards, icy winds, work provided a pattern of existence, regimented as it was. So we were in Topaz for the duration of the war, three years, and we were released after the defeat of Japan.

You have taken a long look backward with me at my childhood, the years of my growing up, to the present. As you see, many changes have occurred in my life, some drastic, some sad, some glad. But as Mother used to say, when she faced adversity, "Spring always returns to the waiting heart." So I thank you for listening, and I say to you, "Grow old along with me; the best is yet to be."