

TOMOKO KONISHI

MR. TADAKI: This is May 14, 1980. I, Wayne Tadaki assisted by Terry Goto, have the privilege of interviewing Mrs. Tomoko Konishi of 434 East Stanislaus in Fresno, California, 93706.

Where were you born?

MRS. KONISHI: I was born in Fresno at 1424 Tulare Street on October 14, 1910.

MR. TADAKI: Where was your longest place of residence?

MRS. KONISHI: I was born in Fresno and lived here most of my life, except about six years in Guadalupe and in the camp.

MR. TADAKI: Where is Guadalupe?

MRS. KONISHI: It's near Santa Maria.

MR. TADAKI: Do you have any recollection of your childhood, what Fresno was like in those days?

MRS. KONISHI: It was just a small town at that time. So we just played around the streets. There weren't many people around there.

MR. TADAKI: What did your parents do?

MRS. KONISHI: My father was a carpenter, and he used to make homes, stores, churches, all kinds of things. My mother was a dressmaker and taught sewing.

MR. TADAKI: How many were there in your family?

MRS. KONISHI: I had six brothers, and I was the only girl. Two boys passed away when young.

MR. TADAKI: Where are they now?

MRS. KONISHI: Two went to Japan, one passed away. One's still in Tokyo. He works now for Fujita Gumi Architectural firm. He was there many years.

MR. TADAKI: Was he an architect?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. Two of my brothers were architects. One brother lives in Berkeley and one in Fresno. He works for the California State government. And he is also a photographer. You don't know Harry Murashima?

MR. TADAKI: I've heard his name, yes. Where did your parents come from in Japan?

MRS. KONISHI: They came from Hiroshima, Kusatsu.

MR. TADAKI: Why and when did your father come to America?

MRS. KONISHI: He came in 1897 to Hawaii, to Kauai, for a few months.

And then he heard about this place. He heard about the weather in Fresno, and his friend told him it is a nice place to live. So he came here.

MR. TADAKI: What did he do when he came here?

MRS. KONISHI: Carpenter work. He came first to China Alley, and he worked for Chinese gambling house, fixing things. Chinese gambling house boss said, "Gee, you are good man. You don't gamble and drink, so you are good man. I can trust you."

MR. TADAKI: When did your mother come, and how did your father get his wife?

MRS. KONISHI: My grandmother asked what kind of wife he wanted. "Well, send me a tall one, that's all," he said. So she looked all over in Kusatsu. She couldn't find any. Finally she went to Itsukaichi and found my mother over there, a tall one. She was 5'2 1/2", that was tall in Japan.

MR. TADAKI: Can you tell me something about your mother?

MRS. KONISHI: My mother was raised by my auntie, because her father and mother were divorced, I guess.

MR. TADAKI: Has she ever told you what happened to her when she came and how it was?

MRS. KONISHI: No. She didn't tell me anything. But she did not like the place where she lived, China Alley. She didn't like to raise her children there because of Chinese gambling. She had one boy there in Chinatown. After that, she went out of there and went to Tulare Street.

MR. TADAKI: On Tulare Street, did you have a single house?

MRS. KONISHI: It was one house building, but it had a store on one side, and my father was a carpenter, and my mother had a sewing school. There was a place for sleep, in the back and cook.

MR. TADAKI: How many students did your mother have?

MRS. KONISHI: At first she had one or two. After we moved to 920 "E" Street, she had more.

MR. TADAKI: What was the name of her sewing school?

MRS. KONISHI: Fresno Murashima Sewing School.

MR. TADAKI: What was the largest number of students.

MRS. KONISHI: I can't remember, six or seven, I guess.

MR. TADAKI: Was that a popular occupation in that day? I suppose women couldn't get other kinds of work so seamstressing was good.

MRS. KONISHI: We couldn't get jobs anyway.

MR. TADAKI: Where did you go to school?

MRS. KONISHI: To Lincoln School which is a grammar school, and then I went to Edison School. I graduated from there and went to Fresno High School for one year, but my father was kind of sick so I came back to Edison and finished over there. It was a nice place.

MR. TADAKI: Were there a lot of Japanese students there?

MRS. KONISHI: Oh, yes. You didn't have very many blacks at that time. I had only one in my class. Not many Mexicans, mostly Germans, Italians, and Japanese.

MR. TADAKI: Do you remember anything about your grammar school days that stand out in your mind, anything that was fun or maybe even sad?

MRS. KONISHI: One thing I can't forget was when I was the leader of the [blank space] we had. And everyone around came to see it. And then I was supposed to do the exercise lead. There were about four girls to lead. And all of a sudden, I forgot all about it. You blank out. I didn't know what I was doing. I was so embarrassed.

MR. TADAKI: So what happened?

MRS. KONISHI: So, I just quit. That was an embarrassing thing to do.

MR. TADAKI: How old were you then?

MRS. KONISHI: About 17, I guess, in high school.

MR. TADAKI: Did you ever have dates?

MRS. KONISHI: Not much. When we went out, we went out together, just boys and girls. Not by ourselves.

MR. TADAKI: What kind of recreation did you have as teenagers?

MRS. KONISHI: They had a little dancing and usually we got together for dinner, and we played mahjong, things like that

MR. TADAKI: Did you belong to any kind of church or organization?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes, Fresno YBA. They used to call it Young Women Buddhist Association and for boys, Young Men's Buddhist Association.

MR. TADAKI: What did you do in the YBA?

MRS. KONISHI: I had all kinds of jobs. I think I was active in everything. I enjoyed doing it. All my life I've been with the church.

MR. TADAKI: Were you involved in any sports, did they have sports activities?

MRS. KONISHI: No. I had heart trouble, so I didn't do much active.

MR. TADAKI: They used to have a speech contest. Did you ever participate in anything like that?

MRS. KONISHI: I used to make Japanese speech. Then one year I got the

first prize in Central California, and in Guadalupe I had the second prize.

MR. TADAKI: After high school, what happened to you?

MRS. KONISHI: Then I broke my fingers so I decided to go to Los Angeles and went to Wolfe School of Custom Designing and graduated from there. I came back, and I was going to work as a designer. Then my teacher said, "Oh, you'd better get married, you are 21 already." I didn't want to get married with my fingers like this, but that's why I did. Mine was arranged, an arranged marriage.

MR. TADAKI: What was involved in an arranged marriage?

MRS. KONISHI: The father of my husband came over. They talked to me and looked at me. They liked me, so they went home and brought their son over. Then the son liked me, too, so we got married. It's funny, huh?

MR. TADAKI: What do you think of that kind of marriage, is it a good way?

MRS. KONISHI: Sometimes. Mine was all right, because he was a nice man. I think some people had a hard time.

MR. TADAKI: I was told that that kind of marriage was more stable because the families had to investigate it, and it was not just young people falling in love and not knowing the background of the family.

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. They have to find out what kind of family they had come from like in Japan.

MR. TADAKI: What is your husband's name?

MRS. KONISHI: Harry Shigeji Konishi.

MR. TADAKI: What did he do?

MRS. KONISHI: He was Minami's office manager.

MR. TADAKI: Was he a bookkeeper?

MRS. KONISHI: Oft, he did everything. He was the manager, anyway.

MR. TADAKI: You said you had broken your fingers. How did that happen?

MRS. KONISHI: I was sewing at home during that time. My brother was working at Kamaboki-ya. Then he broke his glasses and he had to go to get them fixed, so he said, "Can you go for me and help the store?" I didn't want to go. It was during the Christmastime and we were so busy.

Anyway, I went. In half an hour I put my finger inside the grinder. You had to put cold fish in the grinder, and I just went in there. So I lost a whole finger at that moment.

MR. TADAKI: That must have been a traumatic experience. How old were you?

MRS. KONISHI: Just before high school graduation, a teenager.

MR. TADAKI: Did they have to take you to the hospital?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. The hospital was across the street, and that's why I went to Dr. Hashiba.

MR. TADAKI: Were you married here in Fresno?

MRS. KONISHI: No, in Guadalupe.

MR. TADAKI: How long did you live in Guadalupe?

MRS. KONISHI: Six years, I think. In the late 30's.

MR. TADAKI: Why did you come back to Fresno?

MRS. KONISHI: Because my husband was taken to the concentration camp.

MR. TADAKI: That was about 1941, then. Where did he get sent?

MRS. KONISHI: They went to North Dakota, it was bad. They took all the men at that time.

MR. TADAKI: Where were you when Pearl Harbor was announced on the radio?

MRS. KONISHI: I was in Guadalupe.

MR. TADAKI: Do you remember what you were doing, your reaction to it?

MRS. KONISHI: I was taking care of my mother-in-law. She was sick and about to die, so she did not want to go to a hospital. She said, "Will you take good care of me," so I guess I have to take really good care of her. Then I tried not to let her know that there was war coming on, soldiers coming in. All the soldiers came to Guadalupe Park. I didn't want her to know about it. That was the time when Pearl Harbor started.

MR. TADAKI: Then what happened to you?

MRS. KONISHI: I had to give all the things away and move to Fresno.

MR. TADAKI: Did you bring your mother-in-law with you?

MRS. KONISHI: No, she died in December, right after.

MR. TADAKI: Was your husband still home when she died?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. And my second boy was in the hospital in Santa Barbara. He contracted tuberculosis from my father-in-law.

MR. TADAKI: Did he get to come to Fresno with you?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. I went after him, and the boy went to Fresno.

MR. TADAKI: Where did you go to camp?

MRS. KONISHI: To Jerome, Arkansas.

MR. TADAKI: What do you recall about that time? How many children did

you have to take to camp with you?

MRS. KONISHI: Two girls and two boys. Two children were born in camp. The oldest boy was about five, six, the others were small.

MR. TADAKI: When did your husband join you?

MRS. KONISHI: They let him come back after a short while.

MR. TADAKI: What happened to your house, money, and all that in Guadalupe when you had to leave?

MRS. KONISHI: I transferred the money to Fresno Bank, but I just had to leave everything, move out.

MR. TADAKI: What was it like in the camp, did you work or anything?

MRS. KONISHI: I didn't do anything but mess work, a little bit, that's all. I just cleaned night times. The other time I had to look after my children.

MR. TADAKI: What did you think about the camp life?

MRS. KONISHI: I didn't like it. My blood pressure went up over there.

MR. TADAKI: What were the living conditions like? Did they have very good food?

MRS. KONISHI: We had good food. Everything was all right except lamb chops. I didn't like that.

MR. TADAKI: What about your children, how did they react to camp life?

MRS. KONISHI: They were all right. They liked it. They went to grammar school, you know.

MR. TADAKI: When your babies were born in camp, where did you go?

MRS. KONISHI: They had a hospital there, and Dr. Taira was there, so we had good care.

MR. TADAKI: When did you get back to Fresno? Did you stay until the camp was closed?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. We were the last ones to get out. I did not want to go back to Guadalupe because of the damp there. My children used to get asthma. So we came to Fresno.

MR. TADAKI: How did you get to Fresno?

MRS. KONISHI: We came by train and bus.

MR. TADAKI: Did you stay at the hostel where all the returnees without homes gathered?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. It was at the Buddhist Church. We stayed a few months, until we found a home.

MR. TADAKI: How many people lived there during that time?

MRS. KONISHI: I don't know. We had one room. Maybe 20 families. Most places were overcrowded. But I think we left right away, because we found a place.

MR. TADAKI: How did you cook and eat at the hostel?

MRS. KONISHI: We all ate together, everybody, just like the camp. Everybody did the cooking.

MR. TADAKI: How did you find your house?

MRS. KONISHI: Mrs. Kimura had a place, and she had to go to Sanger to work, so she rented her house to us.

MR. TADAKI: Where was it, and was it a big house?

MRS. KONISHI: It was just like this one on Mayor Street.

MR. TADAKI: Were your children able to get into school?

MRS. KONISHI: Oh, yes. Lincoln, same place where I went. Two boys and two girls in school. Two little girls still at home.

MR. TADAKI: What did your husband do after the war?

MRS. KONISHI: When he came back to Fresno, he did gardening. That's the only thing he could do. He didn't know anything about gardening, but I remember he did it. They asked him to come to Guadalupe to work there again, but he didn't want to go back. He liked Fresno weather better for children, so we stayed here.

MR. TADAKI: Who did he work for?

MRS. KONISHI: By himself. He went all over, like Caucasian places.

MR. TADAKI: Did you encounter any kind of discrimination when you came back?

MRS. KONISHI: No. Then I had a Caucasian for dressmaking and used to make their clothes. They used to come from outside of town. They were all nice to me.

MR. TADAKI: How long did you live in Mrs. Kimura's house?

MRS. KONISHI: About two years, I guess. Then we bought this place and have been here since.

MR. TADAKI: Did your children have to change schools?

MRS. KONISHI: We had to borrow somebody else's address to go to Lincoln School. Here was Columbia School.

MR. TADAKI: What are your children's names, and what do they do now?

MRS. KONISHI: The oldest one is Harry Shigeo Konishi. And the next one is Roy Konishi. He is in Daly City. Two girls are here. Dr. Niis' wife

and wife of Nob Araki. He has stores in Clovis. Then one girl is in San Jose, and one in Salinas. One of my boys is a manager at Firestone in San Francisco. Then one boy works at Boys Market here. One girl is at Clovis Toyland Store. She runs that place.

MR. TADAKI: What kind of a store is that?

MRS. KONISHI: Little toys. They have a nice big store. One is a laboratory technician at San Jose at the hospital. The one in Salinas is a housewife.

MR. TADAKI: Do you have any grandchildren?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes, I have 16.

MR. TADAKI: Does your family get together often?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. Once a year and all the holidays we get together.

MR. TADAKI: Do they all come home?

MRS. KONISHI: They try to. But like this Mothers Day, one came on Saturday, a whole week before. Then the others came on Mothers Day.

MR. TADAKI: You are Buddhist, we know. Do you still get to church?

MRS. KONISHI: No, I can't go. I don't go out any more.

MR. TADAKI: Does the minister come to visit you?

MRS. KONISHI: Not very often.

MR. TADAKI: When did your husband pass away?

MRS. KONISHI: Seven years ago.

MR. TADAKI: When your children were going to school, what was it like in this area?

MRS. KONISHI: It was all right. They had no trouble at all. They have trouble all the time nowadays. But then I didn't hear anything about it. Everybody was nice out here.

MR. TADAKI: Did you belong to the PTA at school?

MRS. KONISHI: No, I was too busy.

MR. TADAKI: When your children were young, did you ever go on vacations with them?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. We used to go to San Francisco, and then every year we went to Santa Maria. Then we went to Los Angeles. We had relatives in Santa Maria, Konishi family.

MR. TADAKI: Can you remember anything that was of interest as either having a very good time, or even a very bad time during your life?

MRS. KONISHI: In Guadalupe, I didn't have any good time. I always



stayed home. And I think I had to look after my mother-in-law. My father-in-law went to Japan for vacation and came back with tuberculosis so we had to put him in Santa Barbara right away. And I guess I was always worried about the parents. You don't have a good time with all this. Then same time, my daughter got sick, too. And my boy got sick, so that was four of them. It was worry all the time.

MR. TADAKI: What was wrong with your daughter?

MRS. KONISHI: She had kidney trouble. When my father-in-law came back from Japan, he gave something to my girl to eat with the same spoon. And he had tuberculosis, so gave disease to my daughter. And she was getting fever because she had kidney trouble already. Fever went up and she got meningitis, and she was dying in one week.

MR. TADAKI: How old was she then?

MRS. KONISHI: She must have been three.

MR. TADAKI: And your son contracted it, too. That must have been very active tuberculosis.

MRS. KONISHI: But he is all right now. He is real healthy. Once you get it, you are immune.

MR. TADAKI: What happened to your father-in-law?

MRS. KONISHI: He passed away in Santa Barbara when we were in camp. He was there all by himself. All the Japanese had gone.

MR. TADAKI: That must have been very lonesome for him.

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. So, I don't care for Guadalupe at all.

MR. TADAKI: I don't blame you at all. Besides, you probably didn't have friends like here. I would say you had a very sad time there. Then you had to go to camp on top of that. What was the happiest moment of your life?

MRS. KONISHI: That's about teenager, I guess. Then when I was learning something I was happy, like flower arrangement, tea ceremony, odori-- then I was happy. That's the kind of thing I liked.

MR. TADAKI: Your father had that interest in all the Japanese culture? Have you had an opportunity to use all that Japanese cultural arts that you learned?

MRS. KONISHI: Not any more, but for special occasions, like church.

MR. TADAKI: Did you teach your children how to take up Japanese culture, too.

MRS. KONISHI: No, they didn't like it. They are all Americanized.

MR. TADAKI: Do any of your children make sushi or teriyaki for New Year's?

MRS. KONISHI: Oh, yes. They make them. I was making them until four

years ago, but I got tired and I couldn't do any more. So they said you'd better quit. They started learning and now they make real good ones.

MR. TADAKI: Are there any other Japanese traditions that you think will carry on?

MRS. KONISHI: No, I don't think so.

MR. TADAKI: It's too bad that they lose these traditions and the language.

MRS. KONISHI: They could understand it, but they don't want to talk it. Afraid, I guess. My boy speaks Japanese, the one who works at Boys Market.

MR. TADAKI: He deals with Japanese people, I guess that's why. Do your children participate in Buddhist activities?

MRS. KONISHI: Only girls.

MR. TADAKI: You mentioned that your father built the first Buddhist Church here in Fresno.

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. There is a picture here. The first one in 1901. It was at the same place where the church is now. I think it burned down in 1919. They think maybe the fire started at the altar, senko (incense) or a candle.

MR. TADAKI: What kind of things did they teach at Buddhist Sunday School?

MRS. KONISHI: About Buddha's life and his teachings.

MR. TADAKI: You have another picture here. What is it a picture of?

MRS. KONISHI: That's YBA, the play of Hana Matsuri. That's me. It was probably in high school. The play was for Buddha's birthday.

MR. TADAKI: Where is that picture taken?

MRS. KONISHI: That's in San Francisco. My mother used to go to McDowell Sewing School there. She went there all by herself. I had to take care of my brother. I was in grammar school.

MR. TADAKI: Was she able to understand English.?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. She stayed away one year, I guess.

MR. TADAKI: That would be very unusual in a Japanese family; to be married and leave your family and go for learning. Where did she stay?

MRS. KONISHI: At Kimura's husband's auntie's place.

MR. TADAKI: How about you? Could you go to school and take care of your brother, too?

MRS. KONISHI: Yes. My father was at home all the time. He did

carpentry so he stayed home. My father did the cooking, and I did cooking.

MR. TADAKI: So your father is really unusual for his type of background. He let his wife go get some education, and he taught you all of the Japanese cultural things, and he stayed home and took care of the family and cooked. Very unusual for a Japanese man from Japan. His ideas were very westernized. Remember, he even wanted a tall bride. How did your father learn the carpentry business?

MRS. KONISHI: In Japan. At that time, you had to learn something, so his papa told him to learn carpenter work.

MR. TADAKI: You have had a very interesting family life, Mrs. Konishi. Thank you for sharing your experiences with us.