

STOCKTONSpeaks!

TOSHIYE HIRATA

Toshiye Hirata holds a valuable letter in her hands. Its value doesn't come from the fame of the writer or from any historical significance; it comes instead from the intense depth of its personal meaning for her. The letter is a *Namu Amida Butsu*, a Buddhist expression of sincerest, heartfelt gratitude. It was written to her by her husband, Roy Ko Hirata. In the letter he thanks her from the bottom of his heart for how she raised two daughters and a son with him, diligently and lovingly, and how she worked side by side with him through the many hardships of their lives.

In 1930, her marriage to Roy Ko Hirata, arranged by their families, took place here in the United States. Many Japanese men working in the United States at that point in time would negotiate for brides to come from Japan to America. As Toshiye and Roy were already living in the U.S. when arrangements were made for them to marry, they were able to hold their wedding in the land they both loved. Marriage, for new Mrs. Hirata, was the event that defined her as an adult. It was also the event that led her family and her community to accept her as an adult. Marriage—and more specifically, arranged marriage—was what her parents had expected for her and what she always expected for herself.

Mrs. Hirata was not born in Japan. Her mother and father had come to Stockton in 1909, and she was born in Contra Costa County, California, in 1911. Like many Japanese immigrants, her parents worked in agriculture; in 1917, 24,000 of the 31,000 Japanese living in California made their living this way. Toshiye's parents were farmers who owned and worked a tree and plant nursery as well as a tofu making company. She was a middle child; in her immediate

family were two older brothers, five and two years older and a sister, ten years younger. She also has two half-sisters, fourteen and nineteen years younger.

She was not, however, raised in California with her family. At one year old, she was sent back to Miye-ken, Japan, to live with an aunt, with whom she stayed until she was fourteen. For families struggling financially in the U.S., sending children back to Japan, however painful it might be, was a common practice.

Life with her aunt was not always easy. Her longings for her parents were intense, and she remembers her childhood as a lonely one. Because she was not considered "immediate family," she was given extra duties to perform. Once, when she was twelve, loneliness drove her to leave her aunt's family in Miye-ken and go to Aichi prefecture. There, miles from her aunt's house, was the home where her mother and father would live during the trips they made between their two homelands, trying as best they could to keep their family together. If she couldn't live with her parents, staying in that home at least allowed Toshiye to feel closer to them. Bonding at such a distance was difficult.

Yet despite the hardships she experienced growing up in Japan, her love of Japanese culture and tradition runs deep. Her favorite memory of all from her youth happened in Miye-ken. Just as her family in California struggled to meet even the most basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, so her extended family in Japan struggled as well. The kindness of the girls at her school, prompted by her difficulties, has stayed with her a lifetime: "When I was 11 years old, my classmates got together and sewed a lining [in my clothes] in the sewing class and surprised me with it. I had only summer clothes, so they did this to protect me in the winter weather."

Here in the U.S., she identifies most with Issei, the first generation of Japanese immigrants, although in Japanese terminology her U.S. birth makes

her Kibei, a term applied to a person born in the United States but raised and educated in Japan. Her education in Japan lasted until the 8th grade, at which point she moved to Stockton at age 14. Back in the U.S., she studied English at a special English language school, as well as sewing, flower arranging, singing (Shigin), and folkdancing/singing (Miyo).

The time she had spent in Japan had not weakened her affection for her family; she felt as close to them as ever. Her parents worked hard and struggled financially while she was growing up. Their hopes for their daughter's future were that she be taken care of and develop a means of earning a comfortable living. But their concerns about her were not just material; by their own example, they taught her to value hard work and strength of character. The best piece of advice she remembers receiving as she was growing up was connected with fulfilling her communal role: "One must not be the cause of delays." Toshiye had to get up even earlier than the farm workers themselves, to make their breakfasts so that they could work in the fields.

The economic depression of 1929 hit their family hard. They had to close their tofu business in Stockton and relocate to San Francisco, where they took over another tofu company. When Toshiye married Roy Ko Hirata, she then moved to Linden—although her bond with her family remained strong. She worked with her husband and his brothers as an equal on the Hirata family farm. After two years working together on the farm, each separate family decided to start its own farm. The families prospered, and she and her husband enjoyed life in Linden, where she lived until the age of 31.

Then came an event infinitely far more disruptive for the Japanese community than the depression had been—the attacks on Pearl Harbor and subsequent internment of Japanese-American citizens living in "Military Area Zone 1," which included parts of Oregon, Washington, Arizona, and all of California. Toshiye's life was uprooted, as were the lives of 120,000 Japanese

Americans, and she was sent to Manzanar Relocation Camp, where she spent more than two years. This camp, in the high desert of Owens Valley, west of Death Valley, was dismantled after the war; now only the outlines of cabins and roads are left, along with small memorials constructed later.

When released from Manzanar, she returned to Linden. Although she moved to Stockton at the age of 49 and has lived here ever since, she maintains close ties in Linden. She is associated with the Linden Japanese Community, a group formed by Japanese pioneers, mainly farmers, who have lived in Linden since the late nineteenth century. She also feels close with Aichi Shinboku Kai, a group of descendents originally from Aichi-ken, Japan. She is proud to be associated with these groups, and her bond with them is very personal. "If a member of this group does anything unethical or embarrassing, I feel ashamed."

Religion did not play a large role in her life while she was growing up. It became more meaningful to her after her marriage, however, because her husband's mother was a Buddhist minister. Religion is now very important to her and is yet another source of connection to her community.

Toshiye Hirata is a survivor. "Due to my background, I have a strong appreciation of simple things and family life. My desire to survive and become financially secure occurred after I married and worked long hours on the farm, before and after WWII and being detained in a concentration camp." Her family is a great source of pride and happiness, and in her later years, what she has wanted most for her children and grandchildren is that they get a good education. Learning from their strong, wise grandmother has no doubt been an excellent place for them to start.

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Interpreter: Mas Ishihara
Ethnic Group: Japanese
Generation: Elder