



Shirley Kazuyo Muramoto-Wong | October 5, 2017

My grandmother, Masaye Ishikawa Hori, loved the sound of the koto. She could hear the Honnami family playing koto, *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute), and *shamisen* (3-stringed lute) in their barracks, right across her own barrack located in [Topaz, Utah](#), one of ten World War II Japanese American internment camps. She thought it would be nice for her daughter to learn.

She then asked Mrs. Honnami if she would teach my mom, but Mrs. Honnami said she didn't take students. Then my grandmother found Haruko Suwada, who lived on the opposite side of the camp. Topaz was a town of about 9,000 people, so it was quite a distance for my mom to travel for her lessons. She would sometimes hitch a ride on one of the open trucks going by to make her walk shorter to her koto lessons, which she attended two or three times a week.



Bando Mitsusa with 140+ students at Tule Lake, 1943

Suwada Sensei taught her class using her own koto, since she didn't have any other instruments. I thought that was very big of her to allow a beginner (my mom was about 10 years old at the time) to use her koto. **Suwada Sensei also taught her the koto songs all by memory, which is the way she taught her students.** My mom said she enjoyed her koto lessons with Suwada Sensei so much that she continued to study koto when her family was transferred to a second camp known as Tule Lake, and even

pursued her practice in Japan, when the family moved there after the war.

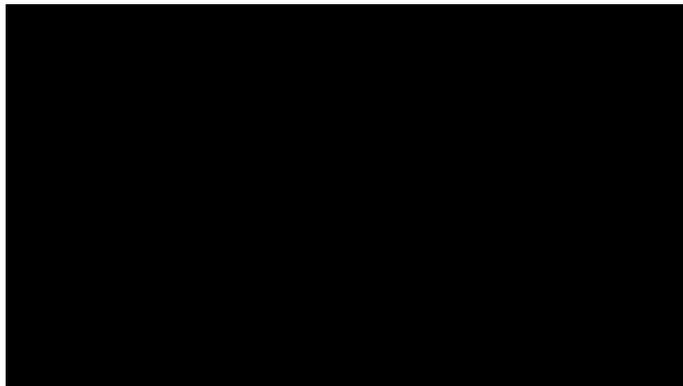


With my friend Kimi Kodani Hill (Left), whose grandfather, Chiura Obata, founded the Topaz Art School

I had been listening to and learning koto from my mom since I was a baby, and, like my grandmother, grew to really love the sound of the koto. I played violin in school, and for a time, wanted to pursue the violin, but I came back to koto every time. After graduating from UC Berkeley in 1976, I traveled to Japan for the first time to take my Shihan teaching exams with other Japanese candidates. Incredibly, I passed with high “Yushusho” honors and received my DaiShihan master teacher designation from the Chikushi Kai koto school in Fukuoka in 2000. I really wanted to be more of a performer than a teacher, but I have never been without students, even when I wasn’t looking for them.

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My appreciation of this gift of music passed down from the teachers who taught my mother in camp deepened in 2008, when I began researching Japanese traditional artists for a documentary film, [*Hidden Legacy: Japanese Traditional Performing Arts in the WWII Internment Camps*](#). This involved interviewing thirty artists in the fields of music (koto, nagauta shamisen, shakuhachi, shigin, biwa), dance (buyo, obon), and drama (kabuki, noh), who were interned at Tule Lake, Manzanar, Amache/Granada, Rohwer, Gila River, and Topaz for the duration of the war. Working on *Hidden Legacy* gave me more purpose and reason for ensuring that the koto and other Japanese traditional arts continue in the United States.



Hidden Legacy, the 2014 film I produced exploring the struggle to practice Japanese traditional arts at the American Internment Camps. The title image above is Nobue Wakita's koto group at Manzanar Camp. Her daughter, Kayoko Wakita, was interviewed for the film and is standing 3rd from the right.

It has always amazed me that in this remote place out in the middle of nowhere, my mom was able to study koto, which is considered the national instrument of Japan. She was only 10 years old when she and her family were sent from their home in San Mateo, California, to Topaz, Utah. She had never had any music lessons before camp, and despite the harsh conditions, her memories were those of a child's experiences, so she said camp was "fun!" She was around her friends and they could play together whenever they wanted.

 *I went to the East Asian Studies Library at UC Berkeley and started wandering around, just like in a forest.*

Over the years, I've always wanted to visit Topaz, and so I was honored to be asked by the Topaz Museum Committee to play the koto for the Museum's grand opening ceremonies this July in Delta, Utah. Because I don't trust the airlines with my 6-foot-long instrument, my husband Bob and I decided to do the long, 11-hour drive from Oakland, California to Salt Lake City, Utah, by car. We arrived at the Sheraton Salt Lake City on Friday, July 7th. It was great to see some of my friends who made the long trek there, including Kimi Kodani Hill, whose grandfather, Chiura Obata, founded the Topaz Art School, and taught art at UC Berkeley both before and after the war. But the person I was most anxious to meet with was Grace Oshita, who had also studied koto with Haruko Suwada, the same koto teacher my mom had at Topaz.



Here I am with Grace Oshita, seated.

When I was researching koto music in the camps, I became frustrated that I couldn't find much written information in books and articles. I even went to the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles and found a *biwa* (5-stringed lute) on display, but no information on who played it or which camp it came from.

A friend gave me a suggestion that I should just roam around a library and see what I could find. I thought it was a crazy idea, but decided to try it. **So, I went to the East Asian Studies Library at UC Berkeley and started wandering around, just like in a forest.** After a while, a book on world immigration caught my eye. I pulled it out, and looked at the contents. There was a section on Japanese immigration to the U.S. It also had a section on the incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans into concentration camps during WWII. **Within the pages, I found a photo with a music group at Topaz, and wondered: could that be Haruko Suwada, my mom's koto teacher's group?** I told a koto colleague about this, and she advised that she was on a bowling team with one of Suwada Sensei's grandchildren. This same connection told me that I needed to contact the children of Hideko Adachi, Suwada Sensei's daughter, to ask permission to talk with her. Mrs. Adachi was living in San Francisco, then about 90 years of age. However, when I tried to contact Mrs. Adachi's children, they were very protective of her and would not allow me to talk to her. I sent a copy of this photo to them, and asked if they could identify whether this was a photo of Haruko Suwada's koto group at Topaz. They confirmed that it was, but they still would not allow me to interview Mrs. Adachi.



Jane Beckwith, Executive Director at the Topaz Museum

As time went on, I sent the photo to Jane Beckwith, Executive Director at the Topaz Museum, and she recognized Grace Oshita in the photo sitting right next to Suwada Sensei and put me in touch with Grace. Grace helped me identify the performers in the photo and told me that while she had taken koto lessons in San Francisco from Haruko Suwada prior to their incarceration, she didn't study in camp—she only joined in on performances at Topaz. During the time of my research, I did not find many koto teachers or students who would talk about their experience in camp, so I truly appreciated her information. Grace, now in her 90s, is a *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese American) who still lives in Salt Lake City, although I don't know if she plays koto any longer.

For the opening ceremonies of the Topaz Museum, I decided to play variations from the theme of "Sakura" (Cherry Blossoms), because it was the most iconic traditional Japanese song, and one most koto players had to learn when they started their koto lessons. **Somehow, I felt a spiritual energy in the room as I played.** I dedicated this performance to Haruko Suwada as a thank you to her for teaching my mom, and planting the seed which also brought me to koto music. **I felt I was completing a circle with this performance at Topaz.**

“ Somehow, I felt a spiritual energy in the room as I played.



Playing koto at the opening ceremonies of the Topaz Museum, July 8, 2017

Later that afternoon, I performed at the community center which was right next door to the Topaz Museum for those attendees coming through during their tour of the camp site and the museum. I played some western songs mixed in with the Japanese songs, including my version of "Sentimental Journey" in tribute to the swing bands that performed at the camps. I also gave a short talk about the research that brought me to produce the *Hidden Legacy* film, **sharing stories of the Japanese traditional artists whom maintained their artistic practices and even taught students in camp, at a time when the War Relocation Authority emphasized the importance of assimilation and Americanization.**



Giving a demonstration/lecture at the Topaz Museum opening program

I had also signed up for a personal tour of the Topaz camp on Sunday, the day after the opening ceremonies. Executive Director Jane Beckwith, a third-generation Delta resident who has worked on this project for so many years and whose grandfather and father ran the town newspaper during WWII, gave us this private tour. Jane pointed out many places as we drove towards the location where my mom's family lived. Topaz is the only camp that still has most of its concrete bases of buildings intact, so if one knows the address where their family lived, it can still be located.



Standing at the doorway of the barracks where my grandparents, mother and aunt lived, identified by Jane Beckwith of the Topaz Museum

My mom's family lived at Barracks 3-11-B. Jane took us to this location. We found some interesting artifacts: a woman's hair pin; the spring of a mouse trap; pieces of someone's sunglasses, and so on. **When Jane said, "You're standing at the doorway where your family lived," ...I almost lost it.** I stood there wondering what my grandparents must have thought looking out into this desolate place: "What are we doing here in the middle of nowhere?" "What is going to happen to us, our children?" So many questions I'm sure must have gone through their minds, and a feeling of hopelessness is what I felt. How could they live in this desert? It was 103 degrees when we were there in July 2017, and the dust and dirt clung to me. Even as I tried to wipe it off my pants, I couldn't get it off my hair, my hands.



Artifacts we found at Topaz.



Artifacts we found on the grounds of Topaz.



Artifacts we found at Topaz.



Artifacts we found on the grounds of Topaz

Taken away from their homes and lives in 1942, all of a sudden, there was time on their hands. The camp residents went to work setting up schools for the children so there would be no interruption in their education. They set up activities, asking anyone with skills in anything to set up classes in a myriad of disciplines: making and building furniture, artistic activities, like art, sewing, music and dance. My grandpa made koto tuning bridges for my mom using scraps of wood and toothbrush handles. My mom learned how to make patterns for clothes in camp. They kept active to keep themselves from getting depressed about their surroundings.

 *When Jane said, “You’re standing at the doorway where your family lived,” ...I almost lost it.*

With this pro-American narrative saturating all ten internment camps, I thought it was brave for my grandmother to have my mom learn to play koto there. I also thought it was very brave for artists like Haruko Suwada, who kept Japanese traditional arts alive in the camps. **Just prior to everyone being taken away to the camps, many Japanese Americans destroyed anything Japanese they had: phonograph records, letters written in Japanese, etc., as they were afraid that if the FBI discovered these possessions, they might be charged with espionage and taken away, as they saw with many others being removed from their homes.** Because of this, it created a stigma around practicing anything “Japanese.” Although some of the WRA (War Relocation Authority) camp directors allowed Japanese Americans to continue practicing Japanese arts within the camp prison walls, I’m sure it must have brought an air of suspicion on those who practiced these arts. **The WRA directors allowed these practices to continue to keep the camp calm, to try and keep internees from having riots and unrest.** I started to realize that my grandmother had many reasons behind her decision to have my mom study koto. **Studying the koto not only gave her the ability to play a musical instrument and the solace to calm oneself with music, it also had a way of instilling part of her cultural heritage and pride in herself.** Part of the strong narrative of the camps set by the JAACL (Japanese American Citizens League) was the message that the Japanese Americans should all assimilate into white American culture in order to be accepted as Americans. The JAACL was officially established in 1930 by a group of Nisei college graduates who were tired of being discriminated against because of their Japanese ancestry. **They had been born and raised American yet had to struggle daily to affirm their patriotism toward the United States.** They formed the Japanese American Citizens League in an effort to unify the Nisei and to help the second generation assimilate to white ideology. This group believed that the complete immersion of Japanese Americans into the white community was the only way to rise above any misconceptions or suspicions that white Americans may have had about the Nisei. (Bill Hosokawa, Nisei: The Quiet Americans, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1969, p. 194)

What I took away from the experience of interviewing these artists who kept up traditional arts in the camps was that they realized what was happening: that **along with their belongings and livelihoods, their culture and their soul was also being taken away from them.** These traditional artists were not going to let this happen, even if it meant that it would bring suspicion on them and their actions might put them into prison. Some continued just because they loved the art, but some also practiced

these arts to express their emotions of stress and anger.

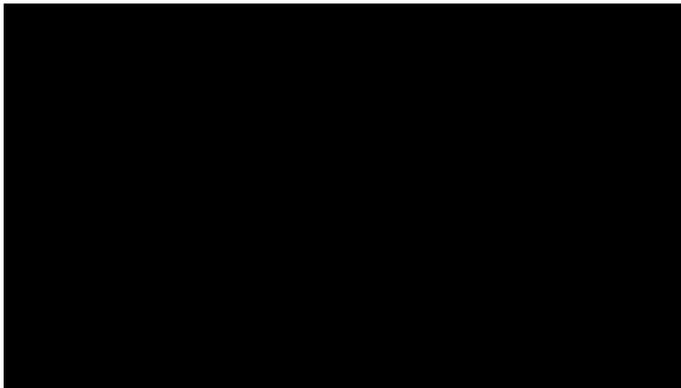


Pointing out the location of the barracks where my mother's family lived at Topaz.

I'm grateful to ACTA for allowing me to help my students continue the tradition of koto music along this path through their [Apprenticeship Program](#). Being able to practice these traditional arts is a gift from all of them, and I hope we will be able to continue learning from them, and keep these arts alive for future generations to come.

“ Anything which is tied to immigrants is being thought of as un-American, when in reality, it is the definition of what being an American is.

I feel that we Americans have gotten used to feeling an energy coming from our diverse cultures, but in our current political climate, it seems like anything that comes from this diversity is being threatened of erasure. It's a similar situation Japanese Americans felt during WWII, when everything Japanese brought suspicion on Japanese Americans and practicing Japanese arts was considered un-American. Now, **anything which is tied to immigrants is being thought of as un-American, when in reality, it is the definition of what being an American is.** Because we are a land made up of people from many backgrounds and cultures, we as Americans have benefitted from these influences. We cannot forget what immigrants brought to this country, and how it has made us strong.



Performing "Haru no Umi," or "Spring Sea" by Michio Miyagi, with shakuhachi performer Kaoru Kakizakai in 2014.

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