MASAO YAMASHITA

David Ko

Masao Yamashita was born in Kyushu, Japan, on August 20, 1934. His parents immigrated to Rocksprings, Wyoming, shortly after he was born. In 1936, they established a boarding house that catered to Japanese bachelors who were working in the mines. Life for Masao was relatively pleasant. However, on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which ordered all people of Japanese ancestry into military internment. ”I saw many flyers and posters on every streetlight and billboard in our town,” Masao recalled. ”My parents said that we had to move to a new home that the government made for us. I was happy to move to a new home, but that night my mother cried all night.” Masao and his family were given two weeks to prepare for relocation. ”My parents tried to sell the boarding house but no one wanted to deal with them. In the end, we had to leave behind everything we couldn’t carry. At night I could hear my father yelling at my mother that he would rather burn down the house than let a white man take it after they left. By the end of the two weeks several military trucks came to town and we were herded like cattle into the trucks.”

The U.S. Army interned 110,000 men, women, and children in ten remote camps. Due to the hurried nature of relocating so many people so quickly, the American government did not have adequate time to set up internment camps. The best solution was to hold many Japanese Americans in temporary areas until the camps were completed. To Masao’s surprise, the military trucks stopped at a racetrack in San Francisco. The temporary camp was surrounded with barbed wire and armed guards.

> We were ordered to stay inside the racetrack and not to try to escape. There were guards everywhere and my parents told me not to stare at them or they’ll hurt me. We were allowed to walk around the racetrack and they gave us food, but during the night we were forced to sleep inside the horse stalls and they gave us straw mattresses to sleep on. A

> few weeks later they came and gave us cotton mattresses, and after about four months a train took us to Topaz.

The first internees were moved into Topaz, Utah, in September 1942. At its peak, Topaz held 9,408 people in barracks of tarpaper and wood. “When my family arrived at the camp we were housed in a long bungalow structure with other families. It was very difficult for my sisters because there was very little privacy and it was a very difficult period of adjustment for me and my family.” It was at this point in his life that Masao began to develop mixed feelings toward his Japanese heritage. “I didn’t know why this was happening to us. People treated us differently only because we were Japanese. I didn’t start this war. I didn’t even fight against America in this war, but just because I was Japanese they were treating me like I was the enemy.” Masao refused to attend the Japanese school at the internment camp. “At that time I didn’t want to learn Japanese. I didn’t want to learn about Japan. I wish Japan never bombed Pearl Harbor. I just wanted things to be normal again and get out of that camp.” Slowly Masao began retreating from social events and spending more time pondering his own personal and cultural identity. He began a friendship with one of the American guards, who would brought him books by American authors. He told Masao stories about his service in the United States Army. “I was happy that this soldier talked to me like a human being and didn’t look down on me because I was Japanese. He would tell me that in the Army they don’t care what color you are as long as you were fighting with them.”

For two years and six months, Masao’s resentment towards his Japanese identity slowly kindled and his resentment began leading to violent conflicts with his family.

> I remember this one night my father asked me why I didn’t go to Japanese school like all the other children and I told him that I didn’t want to go because I don’t care about Japan. He had never hit me before, but that night my father beat me senseless. I was bedridden for a week and my mother took care of me. She would tell me, ‘Masao your father loves you but you must not anger him. You are Japanese, we are Japanese, we must be together.’ It only made me angrier.

After the beating, Masao receded further his bitterness towards the Japanese. “I was so mad that my family and I were being treated so badly; all because of this war the Japanese started. We lost everything because of them, but there was no one that I could talk to, no one that wanted to listen to me.”

By October 1945, the Topaz internment camp was closed down. Masao and his family were allowed to move to Salt Lake City, 150 miles away.

> The news of the defeat of Japan spread really quickly and we were told by the soldiers that the government would release us soon and that we should start packing our belongings. I didn’t know what to think at the time. I was happy we were finally leaving. I just wanted to get out and have everything back to normal again.

Soon after moving to Salt Lake City, Masao’s life was in turmoil once again. “My mother divorced my father three months after we left Topaz. She packed some clothes and took our youngest sister with her. She never told us where she was going. I didn’t hear from my sister for almost ten years.” The normal life that Masao had dreamed about for the previous two years dissolved almost overnight. “I was left with just my father and my brother. My three other sisters got married very shortly after and left with their husbands to different cities. My father worked as a gardener and began to drink heavily.”

Luckily, Masao was able to find some normalcy while attending high school in Salt Lake City.

> I had fun in high school. There were only a few Japanese or even Asian students at my school and the other kids treated me like a regular person. School was the one thing that actually kept me happy at the time. I even dated a white girl for a little bit. It wasn’t anything serious, but I began to feel that things were going the right way for me now.

After graduating high school Masao recalled the conversations he had with the solider during his time in Topaz, and contemplated enlisting in the military.

> I remember what the soldier told me at camp and when I saw that the military offered a GI Bill I made my mind up right then and

> there that I would enlist. I had no money after high school so I couldn't apply to college so I thought that this was the best opportunity for me to go and travel and when I got back I could get a higher education.

Masao enlisted, in the Air Force, and after boot camp he was stationed in Japan for two years. When I discussed how he had felt going back to the homeland that had caused him so much personal turmoil he simply said, "[b]y then I didn't consider myself Japanese at all. When I was stationed in Japan I didn't try to go out and explore the country. I spent most of my time at the Air Force base and with my free time I would just hang out with my friends in the barracks." Asked if he had considered marrying a native Japanese girl, he replied, "Not one bit. I never put any serious thought to marrying a girl in Japan. For me it was like I was on vacation in a foreign country."

After completing his military obligations, Masao moved to Los Angeles, and with the money he received from the G.I. Bill he was able to bring his father and brother to California to live with him. In Los Angeles, Masao attended a technical trade school and after graduation he applied for a job at the Los Angeles County printing press. Masao said that he never had any problems with racism or discrimination in his work life. In a series of fortunate events, Masao was also able to meet up with one of his female high school classmates named Yumi who had moved to Los Angeles a year prior to Masao.

> My uncle was living in the Los Angeles area and he had invited me to go have dinner with him and a special friend that he was bringing. I knew that this would be an introduction of some sort to a girl that he wanted me to see. Little did I know that this girl was an ex-classmate of mine that I knew in Utah. I didn't take it very seriously.

By the following year Masao married Yumi. With the help of the G.I. Bill, they purchased a house in the San Fernando Valley.

> After I got married and moved to the valley I thought that my life was finally going in the right direction. We had two children, one son and one daughter, and I was the happiest father in the world. One reason I moved to the valley was to get away from the Japanese community and to start a new life. I didn't want to send

my children to Japanese school; I just wanted them to live a normal life.

Masao is currently one of the volunteer curators at the Japanese National Museum in Little Tokyo, downtown Los Angeles. He retired three years ago from his job with the Los Angeles County printing press and spends about five hours a day at the museum giving tours and sharing his personal experiences. When I asked Masao how he feels about his experiences and how they contribute to his definition of being an Asian-American he simply replied, "I am an American. I love America. There is no other place that I would rather be."

KYAW LIN TUN'S MOTHER

Kyaw Lin Tun

My mother grew up in Mandalay, a large city in Myanmar. Her living conditions back in Mandalay weren't bad because her father was wealthy. They had a massive two-story house and all the neighbors that walked by admired it. Her father was well known throughout the community, and their home was known as Mr Leather's house (U Maung Ko's house.) "He was a very hard working man," she told me. Her father owned a leather factory that manufactured high quality leather that was exported to India, Germany, China and Malaysia. At one point, her father had over three hundred men working for him.

In Mandalay, the street where she lived was lined with small stores that sold mostly Burmese snacks such as preserved fruits, in a special sauce, soda and seeds. The small pharmacy would sell herbs and medicine and sometimes tried to imitate Western names. Meat stores were buzzing with people and flies. An occasional carriage pulled by horses would pass by the house, where on many nights the whole family sat outside, in a group, and because the humidity and heat were unbearable inside. Mandalay lies almost directly on the equator. During the summer, temperatures often exceed 100 degrees on a cool day and many deaths occur because of heat waves. My mom said as a little girl, her older brother took them all over town due to their wealth. She said they owned three different cars, a Mercedes, a truck, and the Jeep that they used to travel with.