

Internment Camp and Identity – Excerpts from Kay Sekimachi’s Interview

Baizerman, Suzanne and Kay Sekimachi Stocksdale. “Oral history interview with Kay Sekimachi [Stocksdale], 2001 July 26–August 6.” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. 2001. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kay-sekimachi-stocksdale-11768#transcript>.

Kay Sekimachi on Relocation and Internment Camp

“We were living on Berkeley Way, and all I remember is that my mother, you know—rumors started flying around that if you had anything Japanese, that you had to get rid of it. And so I remember her breaking Japanese records and even burning books, I think. You weren't supposed to have any books or magazines in Japanese.”

“And then, of course, we were told that we were going to be relocated, or that we were going to an assembly center, and to pack up your belongings. And so it turned out that my mother worked for a very nice family here in Berkeley, the Dennesses, and they said they would take as much stuff as we wanted to store. And I don't know where these trunks came from, but we did pack up a couple of trunks and we put what we thought was precious to us.

And I know I saved my paper dolls, because as we were growing up, all we had to do for recreation was to play with our paper dolls. And that meant cutting the dolls out of the newspaper every Sunday, and then making clothes for them. So I still have them.”

“We had some suitcases—well, as much as we could carry, that was about it. So it wasn't much. And I do remember, we left a whole bunch of stuff right in the middle of the room. And, at that point, dealers were coming around buying up what people left. And we did have an upright piano that was given to us, and that went for five dollars. That was probably a pretty good price for it in those days [laughs]. But anyway, I do remember that we did get five dollars.

And what I do remember the most is that we left a bunch of quilts. These quilts were given to my mother by one of the women she worked for. And I do remember that they were beautiful, and I think now, my gosh, if we only had them.”

“By bus to Tanforan Assembly Center [for ‘Persons of Japanese Ancestry;’ opened April 27, 1942, and housed 8,000 people]. And then, we were assigned rooms in a barrack, and there were cots and we had straw mattresses, and it was just bare other than the cot. And somehow, we managed for, I think it was about three months that we were in Tanforan. But I must say, the first few days, I thought, when we had to stand in line at the mess hall for meals, and I really thought, gosh, are we going to survive, because nothing was organized.”

[Interviewer: “And was it Japanese food? Was it things you were used to eating?”]

“No, it was, I guess, sort of army meals, beans and hot dogs and stuff like that.”

“Well, the older Niseis, who were, like, in Cal by that time, they started a school. And then Professor Obata from Cal was in our camp, and he started an art school. And so, that's where my younger sister and I went to. So every day we drew and painted.”

“They did have school. We were moved to Topaz, Utah, and there they did have schools organized. And so, actually, I graduated high school in Topaz, class of '44, something like that.”