

**Born In The USA:** Yoshiko Uchida was born in California, pledged allegiance to the flag each morning in school and loved her country. But her face, her eyes, her name, her heritage, her emigrated parents, indicated to others she was not an American, which she was.

Her name troubled teachers to pronounce, and necessary questions troubled her: “Can we swim in your pool? We’re Japanese.” “Will the neighbors object if we move in next door?” “Do you cut Japanese hair?” And, she hated it when people would compliment her on her perfect use of the English language.

She and her sister Keiko refused to attend the Japanese Language School albeit they honored their mother by letting her teach the language to them personally. And while Yoshiko learned much Japanese culture through osmosis, she always preferred her white baby dolls who didn’t really look like her because she always thought of herself as an American, which she was.

Yoshiko and Keiko grew up in a bungalow with a sandbox and two swings in their large backyard with fruit trees from which her mother made jam. Her father took the ferry to work each day. She and her sister put on shows for the neighborhood kids, roller-skated down the block, played cops and robbers. She always thought of herself as an American, which she was.

She hated when visitors from Japan would come visit, which was often. She was embarrassed when Japanese students studying in the US would be invited for dinner, which also was often.

When in seventh grade, her jr. high school was damaged by the 1933 Long Beach earthquake and condemned unsafe. She was sent to Willard Junior High on Telegraph Avenue in a white affluent area, six blocks east of her home. Japanese American college students worked in these homes but none lived in them, per an unwritten realtor practice. Yoshiko already knew what it was to feel unwanted in certain shops or restaurants or hotels, to be treated as if she weren’t there, but to be ignored everyday by classmates really scared her.

When twelve, she sailed on the Chichibu Maru with her parents and sister to visit Japan and family there. On the ship they dined with the Deans of Women at Mills College and the University of California in Berkley, who each invited the girls to attend their universities.

During her visit in Japan, she blended in and looked like everyone else although she longed for hot dogs, chocolate, and bathrooms with plumbing. She missed her English language, especially when asked by an old woman to read a bus sign for her and she could not. In a country where she appeared to belong she most poignantly experienced being a foreigner, which she was.

High school years for Yoshiko were socially strained but she excelled in her studies. She took extra classes, graduated early and at sixteen enrolled at University of California, Berkeley. Japanese American college students were excluded from the white sororities and fraternities but welcomed into the new Nisei community of Japanese Men’s and Women’s Student Clubs where Yoshiko finally was able to socialize, date and have fun.

She was a senior when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. From that moment, all

Japanese and all Japanese Americans had become the enemy. Her mother and father were not citizens because U.S. law prevented Asians from becoming naturalized citizens. Yoshiko and Keiko were not treated as citizens, which they were.

Racist groups called for a forced eviction of all Americans of Japanese ancestry, a hatred not new. Laws restricting Japanese immigration and land ownership had existed for more than a hundred years. Congressman John Rankin had shouted on the floor of the House, "I say it is of vital importance that we get rid of every Japanese...Damn them! Let us get rid of them now!" No such anger or action was directed toward German or Italian American immigrants or citizens whose countries also were at war with the U.S.

Ten weeks later, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Exec. Order 9066 authorizing the exclusion of all persons of Japanese descent. Her father was taken away for questioning. A guard remained in her home, which had been searched. All leaders of the Japanese American community, businessmen, teachers, bankers, farmers, fishermen, were apprehended and sent to prisoner-of-war camps. All were registered, numbered, tagged, and kept under armed guard. Many were herded into buses or trains surrounded by American soldiers carrying rifles with fixed bayonets, some were forced to board militarized freighters and made to strip naked.

Yoshiko, her sister and mother, were taken to live in horse stalls that reeked of urine and horse manure. She later wrote of how, in the mess hall, "a cook reached in a dishpan full of canned sausages and dropped two onto my plate with his fingers...we tried to eat but the food would not go down...we were constantly hungry." All mail was censored. There was a morning and a six p.m. daily head count. The encampment was unconstitutional but Japanese respect for authority did not harbor thoughts of resistance or confrontation. Civil rights demonstrations and marches of the sixties were not yet born in the USA.

The Quakers were instrumental in helping encamped students be allowed to return to school. In 1943 Yoshiko was accepted to graduate school at Smith College, and was allowed to leave but could not leave behind the pain of those years. After graduating, she taught in a Quaker school then sought employment that would allow more time for writing, and write she did.

She authored almost forty works of fiction and nonfiction all of which embody cultural differences, ethnicity, citizenship, identity and the racism endured by children making their way in a world of differing cultures, cultures often in conflict. A Ford Foundation Fellowship sent her to Japan for two years where she learned to appreciate the culture of her own ancestry which she "hated" as a child growing up in California.

She was a pioneer who created a body of Japanese American literature that had not previously existed, especially in children's books. Of her books she said, "I try to stress the positive aspects of life that I want children to value and cherish. I hope they can be caring human beings who don't think in terms of labels--foreigners or Asians or whatever--but think of people as human beings. If that comes across, then I've accomplished my purpose."

Yoshiko Ushido passed away in 1992 after a prolific career in which she wrote what she came to understand as an American of two cultures and what that meant when one looked as if one was not born in the USA, which she was.

Sources: The Invisible Thread, Yoshiko Ushida;  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoshiko\\_Uchida](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoshiko_Uchida).