

Mrs. Kiyo Goto

originally interviewed 1972
by Maya Koizumi

reinterviewed 1977 by
Taki Bluesinger

(NB. This is an edited transcript, combining passages from both interviews, translated and transcribed by Taki Bluesinger, December 1977.)

INTERVIEWER: How old are you?

MRS. GOTO: Seventy-six years old. (Born 1896.)

INTERVIEWER: Where were you born?

MRS. GOTO: In Tokyo, around the Shinbashi (high-class geisha district), but I don't remember exactly whereabouts in Shinbashi. But mother came from Kyushu, in the Kumamoto prefecture.

INTERVIEWER: When did you come to Canada?

MRS. GOTO: I have been here about fifty-eight years, so you can figure out when I came here from Japan. (c. 1914.)

INTERVIEWER: You grew up in Kyushu, didn't you?

MRS. GOTO: Yes, I did, and then I came to Canada.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do in Kyushu?

MRS. GOTO: Oh, it was terrible. From the age of seven I was helping my mother farm. Father was in San Francisco. I was separated from Father when I was four years old.

INTERVIEWER: Have you met your father since then?

MRS. GOTO: No, I haven't. It was very unfortunate. Father didn't send any money to us, so I had to help my mother, not only farming, but I also sold bean curd with Mother. Father sent her a letter and asked her to come over to San Francisco, but Mother didn't want to leave Japan, she didn't want to live with "strangers" there. And Father got quite upset, that's why he didn't send any money to us.

INTERVIEWER: What was your father doing in San Francisco?

MRS. GOTO: He was a tailor, so was Mother, but she couldn't make any money as a tailor in such a small village. I helped her from the age of seven, farming, making bean curd, gathering firewood in the mountains to make the bean curd, and selling flour in town which I had to walk four or five miles to get to. In my childhood we were so poor. That's the kind of work I did until I came to Canada. I came to Canada when I was nineteen years old.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know anybody in Vancouver?

MRS. GOTO: I came here to get married.

INTERVIEWER: HOW?

MRS. GOTO: By picture. I was a picture bride.

INTERVIEWER: Who did you marry?

MRS. GOTO: A Mr. Tanaka, who also came from Kyushu. Of course I didn't know him.

INTERVIEWER: Why did he choose you?

MRS. GOTO: Well, our neighbours knew how hard I'd been working since I was a little girl, and they figured that a woman who is getting married in North America has to be very healthy and a good worker--maybe that's why they chose me. Otherwise, I was supposed to marry a doctor in Japan. But the reason I decided to get married in North America was I wanted to meet Father and send him back to Japan. My plan was to stay in North America about five years and find Father and save some money, then go back to Japan. But I never did go back. I did find my father, through the newspaper and the Japanese Consul in San Francisco, and I sent him back to Japan. My husband and I worked at a farm in Duncan on Vancouver Island milking cows and we made fifty dollars a month. That was really good money at that time.

INTERVIEWER: Was he a Japanese farmer?

MRS. GOTO: No, they were white, and I didn't speak any English, not even "yes," or "no." But my husband taught me a little bit of English and he told me that all I had to say was "yes, yes." We were there about one year. Then I left for Saltspring Island and I worked as a chicken-coop cleaner for three to four hours a day. On my way back home I would collect the laundry from a hotel and wash it at home. Occasionally I helped my husband--he was working for a farmer again. I slept only four or five hours a day, the rest of the time I was just working. I worked there for four years and then I came to Vancouver and I bought a whorehouse at the corner of Powell and Gore with three other women. We turned it into a restaurant where people came to drink rather

than to eat. I had saved two thousand dollars on the Island and I put that money into this business. Of course we didn't have a liquor licence--well, most Japanese restaurants didn't have a licence either, but there was singing, dancing, and a big noise all the time so we got hustled by the police quite often.

INTERVIEWER: Who did you buy from?

MRS. GOTO: From a Japanese fellow who owned another one too. In the first year business was so good I couldn't believe it. You know, there weren't many women around and a lot of customers were fishermen and loggers. They worked out of town and every time they came back to town they spent their money really fast. So I made a lot of money but I spent it fast too. Our cooks made quite plain food, they weren't trained as chefs at all, so customers didn't eat at our restaurant, they just came to drink.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me more about Powell Street.

MRS. GOTO: When I came to Vancouver, there were so many grocery stores on Powell Street. This building (Lion Hotel) was a grocery store too, it was only two or three years old then. Three sixty-five Powell Street was one of the biggest Japanese grocery stores, called "Maikawa Shoten", and next door (three fifty-five) was a fish store owned by Maikawa's son. That's where we used to buy fish for our restaurant. Next door to it (three forty-nine) was a Japanese public bath. I went there to take a bath almost every day for over ten years. Sometimes the place was really crowded, then we had to go to the next block (two hundred Powell)--there were two public baths there. Three fifty-eight and three-fifty-four Powell upstairs were both Japanese gambling clubs--I'm sorry I can't remember their names. The one at three fifty-four Powell was run by a kind of Japanese gangster. They weren't exactly mafia-type, but almost the same kind of people. They hardly ever paid their

restaurant bill, and many other restaurants didn't get paid either. I didn't know the gambling club at three fifty-eight Powell too well, I didn't go there till after World War II.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any geisha girls in the Japanese community?

MRS. GOTO: No, no real geisha girls. The people who came to Canada before the war, they weren't that kind of fancy people, they were all fishermen or farmers. But many waitresses pretended to be geisha girls. They played the shamisen and sang songs but not nearly as good as real geishas in Japan, although some of the older women played quite well. White people believed they were geisha girls but when people from Japan saw them they knew they weren't. (Also, some Japanese fishermen, not having seen real geishas, believed there were many geishas on Powell Street.) There were twenty-four restaurants here but none of them had a licence. The police were constantly coming around. On the corner of Powell and Dunlevy was a Japanese bank. I didn't keep any money there but I sent money to the bank in Japan through this bank--it was called Tamura Shoken. In front of our restaurant there was a bank, no I think it was a financier, now it's a part of the police station parking lot. We kept all our restaurant money there and I had my own savings there too. It was called "Sanban." About four people were working there but they were drinking all the time and I didn't think it was very safe so I took all my money out, but our restaurant business didn't take its money out and just as I thought, none of our company money ever came back. They spent their customers' money and ran away. Lots of fishermen kept their savings there too, and nobody got it back. It was a sad story.

INTERVIEWER: Didn't everybody know what was going on?

MRS. GOTO: No, nobody but me. I knew it from the way they spent money all the time. It happened about two years after we opened our restaurant. At almost the same time, I got rid of my business because I was sick and needed some medical treatment, and a man named Mr. Goto suggested I go to the country to get medical treatment, so I did. My husband was back on Saltspring Island by then, and he was farming, and when he came to Vancouver I was already gone to a place near Kamloops. He got so angry. He thought I had run away with a new boyfriend so he went back to Japan and sent me divorce papers, so I filled them out and sent them back. He was going to marry again but just before their wedding he died. Meanwhile, I was in Kamloops taking medical treatment. Mr. Goto was a boss on a CPR construction job. He took very good care of me.

INTERVIEWER: What was wrong with you?

MRS. GOTO: Well, one of my boyfriends gave me a nasty disease. I had to get penicillin shots, about twelve of them, and they cost twenty-five dollars each. Of course Mr. Goto paid for it, so I worked for him and his crew for five years, washing their clothes, cooking for them. Oh, their clothes got dirty so fast.

INTERVIEWER: Didn't you ever marry Mr. Goto?

MRS. GOTO: No, he was just a friend.

INTERVIEWER: But you call yourself Mrs. Goto, why is that?

MRS. GOTO: Goto is not my legal name. In Victoria I'm still Mrs. Tanaka. But I like to call myself Goto because he was really good to me and he died a long time ago.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do after five years in Kamloops?

MRS. GOTO: I came back to Vancouver again, I was thirty-two then, and bought a lease on the upstairs of a hotel at thirty-five East Hastings Street. Now it's called the Palace Hotel. Then the main floor was a medical clinic, and I turned the upstairs into a whorehouse. It was four thousand dollars and on top of that I had to pay two hundred and fifty dollars rent--it was very expensive at that time. They had only thirty-five rooms, you couldn't make any profit on it if you ran it just as a hotel. So I hired twelve prostitutes and took commissions. Usually, the owner takes fifty percent but I took only thirty percent.

INTERVIEWER: How much did a girl cost?

MRS. GOTO: Well, Japanese women cost between three and five dollars, and white women cost two dollars.

INTERVIEWER: Why did Japanese women cost more?

MRS. GOTO: They were very popular and customers wanted them so badly.

INTERVIEWER: What was your job then?

MRS. GOTO: At first for a while I hired somebody to take care of the business because I didn't know anything about this kind of business, but after one year I got to know how to run it and my job was being friendly with customers and with the police. If policemen wanted women I arranged it for them. Of course they didn't have to pay, I paid the girls, but it's cheaper than getting arrested. Also, I checked the customers' health. If you have a disease then the women will get it and it will go to other customers. Very often I had to ask customers to take their pants off and

I checked.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get women to work there?

MRS. GOTO: Most of them came and asked me if they could work there.

INTERVIEWER: How were the rooms furnished?

MRS. GOTO: A bed, a mirror, and a sink.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of people were customers?

MRS. GOTO: All kinds of people. Japanese, Chinese, and all sorts of white people.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get along with the women?

MRS. GOTO: Oh yes. Remember, I charged only thirty percent and they really appreciated that, and they really liked me.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds as if your business went very well.

MRS. GOTO: Oh yes, except for the first year. Then, luckily, a new chief of city police came in from Kamloops. I'd known him when I was there, and that made my business so easy, even though I still kept watchmen, one at the front door and one at the back door. Many whorehouse businessmen got arrested, but not me. Those people who were arrested often went to jail for quite a long time so my business really picked up. I not only offered my women to the police, I gave money to them too. So I ran this business from 1927 to 1941, and then World War II came along--I lost everything.

I didn't want to go to war camp, I wanted to stay in Vancouver, So I went into hiding in my hotel. Then three Mounties came and arrested me. They sent me to jail. I left a lot of my things at a white man's place, but none of it ever came back.

INTERVIEWER: Didn't you save any money then?

MRS. GOTO: Yes, I'd saved about thirty thousand dollars but that was a small part of what I made. I'd put so much money into my other businesses too, restaurant, pool hall, that kind of business.

INTERVIEWER: How about other Japanese, had they already gone to war camp?

MRS. GOTO: No, lots of them were hiding but they got caught too and they were sent to war camp. But the Mounties sent me to Oakalla instead of Greenwood and kept me there two and a half months.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any other Japanese in jail too?

MRS. GOTO: No, I was the only one. Radio newscasts in jail were talking about the war all the time and I got so itchy. Everybody in jail called me "Jap." I hated being called that, so I'd yell back at them, "Shut up, keto." (Keto means barbarian in Japanese; it's used only for foreigners.) I really didn't like being called "Jap" then. Now I don't care at all. The city police were really good to me because I gave them all kinds of goodies, but not the Mounties, they were so nasty to me.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know why you had to go to Oakalla instead of Greenwood?

MRS. GOTO: Yes, I do, but I don't want to talk about it. Anyway, after two and a half months they sent me to Greenwood and I had to stay there for four years. I was the first Japanese to come back to Vancouver from Greenwood. In Greenwood, the Mounties told us that all of us had to go back to Japan, and if we did they would give us two hundred and ten dollars, so some poor Japanese did. But my Chinese friend came from Vancouver and acted as a guarantee for me. He took me back to Vancouver. Now it's gone, but there used to be a hotel on the corner of Main and Powell. I stayed there when I got back and found a job at a Chinese restaurant on Keefer Street. It was really busy there but I didn't feel too uncomfortable because I'd known so many Chinese people when I was running the whorehouse, so I worked there for one year.

INTERVIEWER: DO you speak Chinese?

MRS. GOTO: No, I can't say I do because my Chinese is almost as bad as my English, but I never felt inconvenienced. Then I opened a gambling club on Powell Street with my Chinese partner. It was on the main floor of the Lion Hotel. I was staying at the Lion Hotel then too. The business went really well. I made about thirty thousand dollars in three years. Then I opened another one on Pender Street with the same partner and a few other new Chinese partners. That went really well too.

INTERVIEWER: Is it very common to have a partnership between Japanese and Chinese?

MRS. GOTO: No, hardly ever, but I had a Chinese boyfriend, and they are so reliable, they wouldn't cheat you of a penny. In a way it's much easier than with the Japanese. And they are very good at business. Here's a good example of it: three years after I quit my partnership in those two gambling clubs, I opened a new one at three fifty-eight Powell Street with a Japanese partner. It went quite well too, but after a few years my Japanese partner ran away to Japan with all our business money. That made me

really angry. Since then I haven't gone into the gambling business again.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do after that?

MRS. GOTO: I started betting on the horses but I lost a lot of money. Then I opened a restaurant on Powell Street. It's now the Aki Restaurant. I named it "Kikusui" but it didn't do a very good business at all. Everything had changed and I couldn't do as well as before the war because I couldn't get a liquor licence and the police were much tougher with us than before World War II, but I still served sake in a teapot. I lost over thirty thousand dollars and about ten years ago I sold it to Aki. Since then, I haven't gone into any other business.

INTERVIEWER: Do you want to get into some business again?

MRS. GOTO: No, I'm too old to run a business anymore.

INTERVIEWER: What do you want to do now?

MRS. GOTO: Well, I want to visit Japan before I die and I want to ask Honganji (the main Buddhist temple in Kyoto) whether they will take care of me after my death. Also, I want to visit the grave of my ancestors.

END OF INTERVIEW