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TULE LAKE ICON PASSES: Hiroshi Kashiwagi was a noted poet, playwright, author, actor and symbol of wartime resistance

November 7, 2019 by PATRICIA WAKIDA, Nichi Bei Weekly Contributor

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When Hiroshi Kashiwagi was born in a boarding house in Sacramento, Calif. on Nov. 8, 1922, no one imagined that he would become a successful activist, writer, playwright, actor, and a poet of such regard that he would be known as the "Poet Laureate of Tule Lake." Although his first book, "Swimming in the American: a Memoir and Selected Writings," was published when he was 83 years old in 2005, Kashiwagi was a prolific writer, publishing four books and writing numerous plays including "The Plums Can Wait" (1949), "Laughter and False Teeth" (1953), and "The Betrayed" (1993) in his lifetime. Kashiwagi died Oct. 29, 2019 in Berkeley, Calif. just days before he was to turn 97.

Articulate and gentle, passionate and humorous, Kashiwagi grew up in the small agricultural town of Loomis in California's Placer County, where his parents ran a fish market and made fresh tofu. Soon after graduating from high school in Los Angeles in 1942, Kashiwagi was incarcerated in the Tule Lake concentration camp in California with his mother and siblings; his father was hospitalized with tuberculosis and never entered camp. Restless and bored, he spent the majority of his time at Tule Lake reading, smoking, and playing cards before he joined a theater group and began to act and write.

When the U.S. government requested camp inmates to fill out what was believed to be a compulsory Leave Clearance Application Form, commonly known as the "loyalty questionnaire," Kashiwagi and his family refused to complete the forms. As a result, they were segregated by the government as "disloyals" and condemned by their community. Since their father was still hospitalized outside the War Relocation Authority camps, the family never requested repatriation, yet they became dangerously close to being deported to Japan.

Through government coercion and intimidation, Kashiwagi renounced his American citizenship, but with the help of American Civil Liberties Union attorney Wayne M. Collins, his citizenship was restored in 1959, a process that took nearly 20 years. With his case to restore his U.S. citizenship in motion, in 1946 Kashiwagi was released from Tule Lake Segregation Center and returned to Loomis.

Despite the fact that the war was over, Kashiwagi continued to be ostracized. He later wrote, "Among Japanese Americans, the most common question upon meeting after the war was 'What camp were you in?' Since camp was our shared experience, I suppose the question is a natural lead-in to a conversation,

year career, he worked as a reference librarian in literature, Japanese language materials, science and government documents, and as a branch manager. At the Western Addition branch he began what is now the largest collection of Japanese language books on the West Coast, before retiring in 1987. In June 2010, a plaque was placed by the San Francisco Public Library Commission at the Western Addition Branch recognizing his contributions.

While the stigma of Tule Lake still lingered, interest in camp stories simmered through the Japanese American community as Sansei children came of age and began questioning their families and the government about the war. Continuing his search to understand his experiences during and after the war, Kashiwagi joined other camp survivors to initiate the Tule Lake Pilgrimage, an intergenerational educational trip to the former Tule Lake concentration camp.

Kashiwagi wrote his iconic poem, "A Meeting at Tule Lake," in 1975, on one of the first pilgrimages to the former World War II concentration camp at Tule Lake. Meanwhile, Kashiwagi's plays and poems were slowly being "discovered" by Sansei writers and artists seeking Asian American literary heroes, which encouraged him to dust off his old manuscripts that had been stored over the years in boxes under the bed.

Kashiwagi's writing is filled with subtle morals, a dry wit, and quite often, the determinedly dark pain of being mistreated, even by his own community. Yet he persevered and continued to write.

"Hiroshi was the first person I knew to have the courage to go public as a former Tulean," reminisced filmmaker and writer Frank Abe. "I first met him at a forum held in the 1970s by the Center for Japanese American Studies, at the old Pine (United) Methodist Church in the outer Richmond District. He wrote throughout the decades, earning even wider recognition for his works late in life."

When the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians was formed to investigate the reasons for the World War II mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, Kashiwagi testified at a public hearing in San Francisco in 1981, part of the long legal process which eventually led to an official government apology to Japanese Americans and redress payments in 1988.

At the age of 64, his acting career was revived when he co-starred with Nobu McCarthy in Philip Kan Gotanda's play, "The Wash," at the Eureka Theater in San Francisco. Additional stage credits with the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco include performances in "And The Soul Shall Dance" by Wakako Yamauchi and "Zatoichi Superstar" by Warren Kubota.

Acting was a lifelong passion; Kashiwagi appeared in the films "Black Rain" (1989), "Hito Hata: Raise the Banne" (1980), "Living on Tokyo Time" (1987), "The Virtues of Corned Beef Hash" (2010), "Infinity & Chashu Ramen" (2013), "Kikan — The Homecoming" (2019) as well as the documentaries "Rabbit in the Moon" (1999) and "Resistance at Tule Lake" (2017). In 2009, his play, "The Betrayed," was produced and performed by the Grateful Crane Ensemble in Southern California and at the Minidoka camp reunion in Idaho.

Kashiwagi published his fourth book, "Starting from Loomis and Other Stories," in 2013 and launched the book in collaboration with the Nichi Bei Foundation's Author Series at San Francisco's Western Addition Branch Library. Tim Yamamura, the book's editor, wrote that "(Kashiwagi) asks us to contend with the historical forces underwriting our lives and, in that light, to measure the quality of conscience we bring to our determinations."

Even as an octogenarian, Kashiwagi's activist work continued, particularly to rectify the reputation of the "No-nos," renunciants, and the draft resisters. He and his wife Sadako tirelessly attended dozens of public



Kashiwagi received the Dr. Clifford I. Uyeda Peace and Humanitarian Award at San Francisco's Day of Remembrance in 2015, pictured with sons Soji and Hiroshi, and wife Sadako. photo by William Lee

A memorial service for Hiroshi Kashiwagi will be held at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Nov. 23, 2019 at the Buddhist Church of San Francisco, 1881 Pine St.

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