

CF/NYH/OSEB/HST /1996-130

Chron Ref: CF/NYH/OSEB/HST/1996-130
file Sub: CF/HST/INT/KUR-001/M

2307Q.....3 November 1985

Interview with Tetsuko Kuroyanagi

by Judith Spiegelman

on November 1 1985

AT NYHQ

Tetsuko: I only know about UNICEF from Mr. Danny Kaye.

Judy: O.K.

Tetsuko: Yes, Danny Kaye, after the war he often came to Japan. I didn't know why he came so often, but we understand he mentioned about UNICEF. So UNICEF and Danny Kaye are always something related. Dr. Ogata explained to me that UNICEF gave milk to Japanese children for fifteen years after the war and immediately I said "Yes, I will accept to be this Ambassador thing."

Judy: Well if you could bring in Danny Kaye and that's what your association is and that when you learned what UNICEF had done, that should be there too. Also if you remember those hard postwar years of being hungry, and whether you personally got UNICEF milk or not. Whatever touched you and what you learned about sharing as a child. I think I remember something from your book that you were always giving things to other children.



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



Rcf0006C41

Item # CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/1996-0113

ExR/Code: CF/HST/INT/KUR-001/M

Interview Tetsuko Kuroyanagi by Judith Spiegelman: Danny I
Date Label Printed: 4/22/2001

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Tetsuko: So I know the experience of hunger. I know what hunger is.

Judy: Exactly. As a matter of fact, we found a letter from a Japanese woman who is now in the United States, she married an American, we can't find her, and she wrote, "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for the UNICEF milk and the dress."

Tetsuko: And also, second hand material came from America just after the war. I don't know what it was. I mean all the baby clothes, all the dresses, the shoes all these things. I don't know. And I got a very cute stuffed rabbit, a toy. It was the first time that I got anything like that and I was so happy, I was not used to stuffed rabbits, and maybe children give to someone.

Judy: A ration.

Tetsuko: Yes, so they gave us some food, clothes and underwear from America.

Judy: Was this through your school?

Tetsuko: I think in the town office there.

Judy: Did you grow up in Tokyo?

Tetsuko: Yes..

Judy: So this was a district inside of Tokyo.

Tetsuko: Yes.

Judy: Well, the picture that we have and we are trying to locate those children is in Kanda district, a daycare centre, did they actually show you the picture?

Tetsuko: No.

Judy: Oh it's wonderful, I wish I had thought to bring it with me.

Tetsuko: Yes, it's just after the war.

Judy: Yes, it's after the war, the children are smiling and happy. What I just wanted to show you were some of these pictures that we will have to edit and pick the best pictures here. Just very briefly if you remember what the little boy was giving you. What are these things called?

Tetsuko: In a schoolHe is reading something. Once he sent me a very beautiful one.

Judy: Is this an ill child?

Tetsuko: Yes, he has a sort of measles. His skin was peeling off.

Judy: Was there something special about that baby?

Tetsuko: His mother had him. He was very small. These are all refugee camps.

Judy: These were the nomads, yes?

Tetsuko: They are not nomads, they are refugees and farmers and they run from the North and come to the This is a house. Can you believe it?

Judy: Were you shocked when you saw this?

Tetsuko: No, because I already knew, I have seen many pictures but these are beautiful pictures. This is the Niger river. But Niger river, if you compare it to twenty years ago is only 2.5 parts of water they have now, which means 97.5 of the water is gone. So this is supposed to be the river. So you can mention that where we are walking is where water is supposed to be.

Judy: You are walking on what used to be the Niger river. And is this bridge something new?

Tetsuko: Yes, but I think that this is here for when they have water in the river, so this is just a bridge.

Judy: The bridge over the river Niger. Where were you walking to?

Tetsuko: Someone was taking me to show me some more of the water they have. So now they can just walk there to there. They don't have to use the bridge. They just walk. Now they are making a dam, because this river near me has no water. So they stop this Niger river here, they don't have any water, but still they stop the water and make a dam, so is very upset because water never come. So anyway you can mention that this is supposed to be water where we are walking. They are working very hard they are not going to school they are helping out on the dam.

Judy: I wonder, did you think these Japanese flags were made by the children?

Tetsuko: Yes, and the State Minister said they wanted to come to see me at the airport they didn't the State Minister and he is the Foreign Minister they never forced them to come they wanted to come themselves to the airport. When they arrived to The second capitol of

Judy: Now, did they sing some songs?

Tetsuko: Not so much in Niger but in Tanzania they always sing Tanzania, Tanzania, how Tanzania is a beautiful country. And these are nomads.

Judy: Was he a chief or somebody special?

Tetsuko: No. This is a girl. This one is Naimy. Naimy is a capitol, and I asked then are you going to school, and they all went to school, so then I asked them what studies do they like, and some said geography, some said history, but they all like sports. So I said why don't you run and here is the goal, and they ran.

Judy: Was it a race?

Tetsuko: No, I asked them to run, very private marathon, 100 metres.

Judy: And you held a line, a rope?

Tetsuko: Yes, this is the goal line.

Judy: Is this a stick?

Tetsuko: Yes, a stick.

Judy: So you were the finish line.

Tetsuko: I asked them to run to this line.

Judy: Did you see the marathon last week, were you here for the marathon?

Tetsuko: No I wasn't here.

Judy: Oh, very exciting, you would have loved it. People from Japan and France, all over the world.

Tetsuko: Yes, I know.

Judy: Was this your first time on a camel?

Tetsuko: No, I did this in 1980, this is not such a good picture because he is hungry or something. This is a wonderful thing they gave me yesterday, they are so happy about the well, which they just made and the water came out and they gave me a live chicken.

Judy: What did you do with the chicken?

Tetsuko: I was so scared, and I said to them, "I cannot bring it back to Japan. So can I give this to a child in this village? The child can eat it, the children can eat it. Then the State Minister said that is very good but you must receive something anyway. So then an old village man gave this three chickens to me so very immediately I gave this to the children and they were very happy.

Judy: And you were scared because you thought it might peck your hand or something.

Tetsuko: I know how much they feel for them to give me these chickens. This is like a treasure.

Judy: The chief gave you the chickens?

Tetsuko: Yes, the village chief gave me the chickens.

Judy: And again, is this man the chief? This is a man, yes?

Tetsuko: Yes,This is the only place they could drink the water.

Judy: This is where they get the water from? There was no well in this village?

Tetsuko: This is just to give water.

Judy: So these are the nomads.

Tetsuko: Yes, these are the nomads.

Judy: And this is a sabre that they use?

Tetsuko: Yes, something like that, but it is very difficult to get a caption for that.

There must be some picture where he is explaining about it, like the Foreign Minister used to. This one is a very strong one. A few days ago the animal died here.

Judy: Before he came.

Tetsuko: But it is 125° and immediately the carcass shrinks, and no vultures or nothing come. There are no trees for vultures to hide in. When the wind blows, all the skin comes off the carcass and it just goes. And just four years ago this place was all villages and fields and grass grew, and cabins. People were living here until four years ago. And now it's like a desert. Everybody's cattle is dying here but this one here is O.K. This one, too. But mention until four years ago these places were villages. After four years, everything is gone.

Judy: And the sand. Had there been grass here, things growing here?

Tetsuko: Yes, a little. But as I said if there were rain for one week we have things growing again. But they didn't have it until I got there, in June. No rains until June.

Judy: Was this the Sahara where you were?

Tetsuko: It was not Sahara. It was a village, but it became a Sahara. It is called Sahel. But they say it is not a desert, at least you can see some trees. It is not desert. But I want you to mention until four years ago, the road was perfect. In the BBC van I had a catalogue of Niger, and it was published only three years ago. It mentioned the road is perfect. Both sides are green. Trees and fields are green and there were straw houses. It is all gone. They used to get the water like this such dirty water you cannot drink. It was a colour like coffee.

Judy: Were these people in the same area or in another part?

Tetsuko: This is a different area. This is Tanout. This is a way to Tanout.

Judy: But they are still drinking from this well?

Tetsuko: Yes, but now they have this one.

Judy: The same people?

Tetsuko: Yes.

Judy: This isn't the same village?

Tetsuko: Usually they drink this water, it is very dirty, but now they have UNICEF well. This one is the same. They have just drank UNICEF water. That's why they gave me a chicken.

Judy: For the opening of the well.

Tetsuko: And this one, is the same place. They used to drink this water. They dig very deep and it is very dangerous. Somebody might fall into the water hole and now, instead of that, they have this well. So they are very happy, so they gave me three chickens.

Judy: Right, because of the India Mark Two pump.

Tetsuko: And this is another village. They already put this one in but the pump isn't there.

Judy: They didn't have the pump yet.

Tetsuko: Yes, because they came the water came, so they put here and the dirty water goes, and the next day they put these things and this is all dates written around the well.

This wall is very high and they are going to make the walls even higher so the animals cannot come inside to drink water. When the people come in, they all take off their shoes.

Judy: Really, to keep it clean.

Tetsuko: Immediately they make some committee to take care of the well water so that the people cannot drink whatever they like. If they drink how much they like, maybe the water will be finished. So immediately when they get a well, they make a committee or union to take care of it.

Judy: Do they pay for the water, or is it free?

tetsuko: It is free, yes.

Judy: Tell me before we leave the water, is it easy to use this pump or is it hard?

Tetsuko: It is very easy. This one is made in India, and making this pump at Mali, ideas from UNICEF and India and they create this type of machine in Mali, because it is cheap and very strong and nothing gets inside after it is made. It is a very practical pump.

Judy: Do you think a child of four or five can operate this pump?

Tetsuko: Yes, It is easy. This one I like, Tanzania, it is a very beautiful picture isn't it? It was very cold so I borrowed an African wrap. I like this picture.

Judy: Now tell me about the snake, was it cold to the touch?

Tetsuko: Yes. This is the last evening in Tanzania, and the State Minister gave us the dinner. This snake handler is the attraction, but the African people in this area never saw a snake before, so everybody ran away. I saw an African snake in Japan, so I wasn't that frightened. I had a morning news show. Sometimes snakes from Amazon or these places came to Japan and we show snakes in the studio, strong poisonous snakes so I am used to it.

Judy: Did you see it as close as I am sitting to you?

Tetsuko: Yes, and she said I will give this to you as a souvenir. The State Minister shouted "No don't receive it!" and then they all run away from the room and I was surprised because I told them they will get used to it, but sometimes town people never saw a snake before. So they are so scared and there is no zoo, so they never saw a snake. They were very upset so then I went there and I could see that it was not a poisonous snake so I said "Thank you very much." And I touched the snake.

Judy: Was it cold, does it feel cold to the touch?

Tetsuko: Yes.

Judy: So you were not afraid for all reasons that you just told me and did you take it.?

Tetsuko: No, no, I just touched it and said "Thank you very much," as I can see this is not a poisonous one.

Eileen: How could you tell?

Tetsuko: Because of the shape.

Eileen: Really.

Tetsuko: Yes, of course, I never touch the mouth.

Horst: It is dangerous if they choke you and wind themselves around you.

Tetsuko: And this man was bitten by the snake, his legs were bloody with bites.

Judy: I see. This was not in the capital. It was in the town.

Tetsuko: It was in the capital.

Judy: The capital.

Tetsuko: Dar-Es-Salaam.

Judy: Is this your Kimono?

Tetsuko: Yes, I wore a kimono for the farewell dinner.

Judy: What colour was it?

Tetsuko: Pink, with a Japanese sign on it.

Judy: Did they film this for the Japanese TV?

Tetsuko: This they didn't because this is not in connection to famine children. They took a picture, but this one is a school farmer, Japanese television gave them a tape or something. This one is Emmanuelle.

Judy: Emmanuelle — a little girl. She has kwashiorkor. She is about four years old?

Tetsuko: Yes, but she weighed something like three kilos. She is very, very small for four years old. And the worst thing is that she doesn't have any reaction, because if you don't have any nutrition, or food then children's brains get damaged, and this is what the Minister is afraid of very much. If we give them food now, maybe they will be O.K. but it may be too late. This is the place where they teach the mothers what the children need.

Judy: And what were you making here?

Tetsuko: If you have a little piece of meat how you feed it to the baby. You have to chop it up into little pieces and put into boiling water and make a broth, and make it cool and then you give it to the baby, because the babies need some nutrition. Otherwise some mothers give just some water and tea. That is why the brain gets damaged, or they die. So mothers have to be educated on how to take care of the babies, and they are teaching mothers how to give their babies meat if they have it.

Judy: So you are all doing the same thing.

Tetsuko: Yes, chopping the beef and putting it into the water, and especially this old child, unfortunately they are all malnourished children, and they are very small and they do not cry out.

They don't have enough energy to cry. They are doing something it is o.k. but they are very malnourished. This is also very unusual.

Judy: So you are all doing the same thing.

Tetsuko: Yes, chopping the beef and putting it into the water, and especially this old child, unfortunately they are all this is between Kenya, they took me from to Tanzania. Suddenly the son of Masai, Masai never usually come to people like this, but this one — he jumped on me. I was in the car and he came out and said hello and started laughing.

Judy: The Masai little boy.

Tetsuko: Yes, the Masai little boy, but it was very unusual for a Masai to come close to you like that, and these too are Masai.

Judy: These are Masai.

Tetsuko: Yes,Masai, and people say it is very unusual thing, they were very friendly and very nice.

Judy: The Masai drink the blood of the

Tetsuko: That is what they say. Yes. This one is in some school in Tanzania, they are singing the Tanzanian song.

Judy: And they sang some songs about UNICEF that they composed.

Tetsuko: Yes, they composed it for UNICEF and for Tanzania.

Judy: And was that recorded for Japanese audiences by the TV team?

Tetsuko: Yes, I explained it to them.?

Judy: Do you have any idea of what they said about UNICEF?

Tetsuko: They repeat something like we are proud of Tanzania, good country and UNICEF is good and that what they are doing is a good thing, "UNICEF, UNICEF, Tanzania, Tanzania, Ambassador." They are very well improvised by the way. That's why they can sing UNICEF, UNICEF, but this is the composed song. They are all children and they gave me flowers, how are these fat children? This is the woman.

Horst: Do you have a tape recording of all the songs?

Judy: Yes, we might have something there.

Tetsuko: This is a woman journalist who is always carrying her baby, and she interviewed me. It is a very good Tanzanian daily newspaper, and she is a very good writer, but unfortunately she has nobody to take care of this baby, so everywhere she goes, she takes the baby, which is very interesting.

Judy: And she breastfed the baby?

Tetsuko: Yes, she uses this wall the study, they don't have notebooks so I drew a Panda.

Judy: You drew this?

Tetsuko: Yes, I did a Panda for them, and I asked have you ever seen a Panda? They said no.

Judy: There are two in the Washington zoo.

Tetsuko: This one is all famine, the mother is famine and this is an eight-month baby. He looks wrinkled all over, and some of them — their eyes are affected.

Judy: Their eyes seem affected.

Tetsuko: Yes, especially this one.

Judy: Are these the same family here?

Tetsuko: Yes, and the mother is like that also.

Judy: And this one?

Tetsuko: This one is eighteen months, and this one belongs to another one. This one has kind of a cholera and had a very high fever, because of mosquitos, malaria fever. This child had cholera, or the high fever from measles, and she shook my hand and never let me go. But this is YMCA. In this place they are very nice. Also I am very good with them.

Judy: This was in a daycare centre?

Tetsuko: No, it was in a village in Dodoma. Is drought place.

Judy: Well, that's wonderful. Now all this material is good for you. ...the captions. We just put in the captions what isn't in the piece.

Tetsuko: Right.

Judy: O.K.

Tetsuko: I think I have to go now, so ...

Horst: Would you care to have lunch with us?

Tetsuko: I don't think so, thank you very much, but I have things to do, rushing, so when I go home ...