# Quietly Enduring: Kuma Oki and the Spaghetti Machine

By Tianna Killoran

In the heat of December 1941, a frail old Japanese lady named Kuma Oki was arrested by the Innisfail police. The arresting constables took note of her most valuable possessions, only noting down £4.10 that were on her person and a "machine for making spaghetti." Australia had just declared war on Japan and, like almost all other people of Japanese heritage or affiliation at that time, Kuma was interned as an enemy alien.

Very little investigation of Kuma was undertaken prior to her arrest in 1941. She was then running a small café on Ernest Street in Innisfail. Her café was just down the road from her son's Oki Silk Store and her daughter-in-law's laundry on Edith Street, next to the White Horse Hotel. Kuma had come to own the ramshackle café, situated out the back of another, similar establishment, when she moved from Thursday Island to Innisfail in 1924 as a single, widowed woman. Like other Japanese cafés running in north Queensland at the time, Kuma's was probably open at all hours and served cheap and warm meals to local sugar cane labourers. Hers was a fairly honest establishment, seeming to avoid the more scandalous events surrounding other cafés in the area, including police raids on gambling dens and exploding car bombs.[1]

Above: Kuma Oki in 1907 from their Certificates of Exemption from the Dictation Test. NAA: J3136, 1907/235

In her time before Innisfail, Kuma first arrived on Thursday Island as an unmarried woman at the age of nineteen. She rented a room

[1] The only known Cosmopolitan Club to have existed in Australia was also on Ernest Street in Innisfail. The physical club stopped operating in 1932 when it exploded after someone place a bomb underneath a car out the front.

Above: Edith Street in Innisfail, 1930. State Library of Queensland, APA-053-01-0001: http://hdl.handle.net/10462/deriv/34910

from a house owned by Toki and Naokichi Maeshiba—storekeepers on the island—for a decade before marrying a pearl diver named Torakichi Oki in 1906. Kuma went on to have three children with Torakichi. The first, Hidewo, was born in 1906, and her second was born "at sea" in 1907 on board the *Yawata Maru*, en route to Japan. Kuma left Hidewo and Hachiro, her second child, to be raised and educated in Japan. Her third child, a daughter named Mary, did not survive past childhood. It was only Kuma's eldest, Hidewo, who returned to Thursday Island in 1924 upon hearing of his father's ill health. The advent of Torakichi's death acted as the catalyst for Kuma's move to Innisfail.

While Kuma's activities were regarded as fairly benign, her son attracted the attention of the local police in the lead up to 1941. As a reasonably educated, bilingual and fairly successful businessman with connections throughout the north, he was an easy target as a community leader of the Japanese living in the region. Although he was likely to have been interned like most other "Japanese" anyway,[2] the Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB) was deeply concerned by a local report about his activities in May of 1940. According to a witness, Hidewo had received a "confidential" letter from the Japanese Consul that requested information about numbers of Japanese people living in the area and gave advice that Germany may win the war. Hidewo had spoken "secretively" to a Japanese cook out the back of the Riverview Hotel, telling the cook to gather all Japanese people living in the area. A carload of Japanese from nearby Mourilyan showed up in town later that day also to meet with Oki. While these might have been unusual activities, it was not unheard of for non-European migrants to be particularly concerned about their security in a wartime White Australia. The Innisfail police, however, dismissed these reports and claimed that the witness was not reliable. Higher up the ranks, the CIB did not share this indifference.

It was such reports about unusual activities that made most Australians, including the government, able and willing to intern individuals as threats to national security. Inspired by "patriotic hysteria," as Kay Saunders terms it, most people were willing to give up their neighbours to authorities on reports of subterfuge and espionage (35). Japanese migrants

[2] Hidewo Oki was born in Australia and was legally a British subject. Australian Citizenship did not exist until 1948 and Hidewo's racial background was considered more relevant to the government than his place of birth.

were considered apolitical compared to other fascist or Nazi sympathisers, and their enemy status rested on racial profiling. Saunders explains that "without a fascist or Nazi organization to identify potential enemy sympathisers and given their "well-known fanaticism and devotion to their country," potential saboteurs, it was argued, could not be easily identified" (35–6). Similarly gross beliefs saw the Japanese as a fanatical and inscrutable people. In one instance, police questioned witnesses as to whether they could discern what a Japanese man was thinking; witnesses' inability to read minds was used as evidence of a spy pretending to be a "good citizen" (Oliver, "Citizens without Certificates" 139). In this climate, letters written in Japanese became propaganda, while radio sets were proof of espionage. Newspaper reports of the time document a conference in Atherton in February of 1942, comprising of delegates from throughout the far north, discussing the concerns about "aliens" congregating and speaking languages other than English. The damaging and violent normalisation of whiteness, including the English language, is one that persists to this day.

Ironically, despite the authorities' belief that Japanese saboteurs were not easily identifiable, it was the visible racial profiling of people like Kuma that led to their internment. In Innisfail, Kuma was regarded as a threat to Australia's national security and was interned under Regulation 26 of the *National Security (General) Regulations* in December 1941. She was 64 years

Above: Kuma Oki's son, Hidewo, in 1907 from their Certificates of Exemption from the Dictation Test (CEDT). NAA: J3136, 1907/235.

old. Almost all Japanese people, including the children and spouses of Japanese migrants, were similarly interned wholesale (Nagata, *Unwanted Aliens* 45). There was no apparent justification for her internment, aside from the general status of "enemy alien." Perhaps in some other version of reality Kuma's spaghetti machine might have been used for subversive, spaghetti-related fascist activities, but it was far more likely that Kuma was an elderly woman who moved from Japan 45 years prior and ran a small-town café that posed no tangible threat to public safety.

The military were so hasty to intern Kuma and the rest of the Oki family that they realised months later that they had acted without the required permissions for the internment. The Oki

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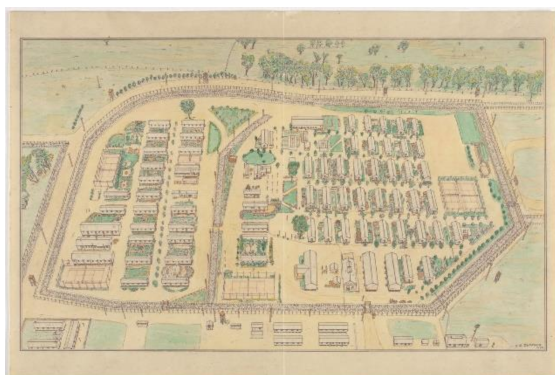
family, aside from Hidewo, had been illegally interned for five months. A flurry of telegrams throughout May 1942 show the army's hurried attempts to cover their tracks by means of a direct ministerial order for internment. Erasing these mistakes was an easy process, as no one except the Department of the Army had realised the error. The Australian military applied their suspicions in a fashion similar to the way an elderly, fascistic, Japanese pasta chef from a fantastical version of rural Australia might test whether her spaghetti is cooked; throwing everything at the wall, waiting to see what sticks, and making a big mess in the process.

Although Kuma appears to have had an opportunity to object to her internment, authorities did not seriously consider the release of Japanese internees. Most Japanese internees were ordered to sign objections to internment forms without any real understanding of what they were agreeing to. Many of the internees who were either elderly or spoke little English were unable to fully understand what they were signing, nor were they fully aware of their capacity to object. Kuma's situation was probably the same, with little evidence to suggest that she spoke much English. The procession of tribunals regarding objections against internment were dealt with in harried ten-minute slots, with the transcripts showing procedural dismissals of all objections. In the few words we have directly transcribed and translated from Kuma, she explained to the tribunal that "My son and family are here, and I do not wish to proceed with the appeal . . . I want to do exactly what the children do, because I have to be with the family." Although Kuma seems to accept her situation, it was not as if she had much other choice. Even if she had understood the tenuous thread of legality that maintained her internment, she was still left with the burden of proving her innocence (Bevege 134–35). And, when her internment was based on racial rather than political affiliation, how could she disprove her own ethnicity to military authorities?

Kuma remained at the Tatura Internment Camp in Victoria for close to five years. We know little about her experience there. While Nagata refers to some ex-internees who saw the experience as "tolerable," it was not a good place



Above: Illustration of Tatura Internment Camp by Karl Muffler in 1944, a German internee. Museums Victoria, MM93594: https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1346872

for anyone, let alone those who were particularly frail or vulnerable (Nagata, "Naïve Patriotism" 114). Self-harm was a frequent occurrence among internees (Nagata, *Unwanted Aliens* 159–60). Many internees of Kuma's age did not live to see the other side of the war, although she was able to endure. While the infamous and bloody Cowra Breakout of 1944 is usually the most remembered event associated with Japanese internment in Australia, Kuma's experience of the internment camp is incompatible with this violent story. In the Number 4 Camp at Tatura, Kuma shared accommodation with other women and children. There are stories of vegetable gardens, film showings every few months, and hours spent playing mah-jong with sets created from scraps of timber (Nagata, *Unwanted Aliens* 160–4).

Although it is worth remembering Cowra as the largest prison escape of WWII and the cause of 235 violent deaths, so too is it important to acknowledge the mundane horrors of war, and the prolonged and unnecessary internment of most Japanese migrants in Australia during this period. It is perhaps this type of brainless and faceless bureaucratic process of internment that was the greater violence committed against Australian civilians during the Second World War. The Canadian Government formally apologised to Japanese Canadians for their internment in 1988 and offered a $300 million compensation package, while the United States signed the *Civil Liberties Act* that same year with similar offerings. Australia is yet to make any moves towards reparations to civilians who were interned during WWII.

The Oki family might be considered fortunate because they were allowed to remain in Australia, instead of being deported like most other internees. It is likely that Kuma was too elderly (although this did not appear to be a barrier for authorities in other cases), while her children and grandchildren were Australian-born (Nagata, *Unwanted Aliens* 193). The family were initially given permission to live in Babinda but were residing at Severin Street in Cairns after only a few years. Again, their part in this larger story is unusual, as there were usually restrictions on ex-internees living north of the Tropic of Capricorn or within a hundred miles of the coast. Although these might seem to be reasonable circumstances, the effect of the War on their lives was far-reaching. Dispossession, or destruction in many cases, of ex-internees' property was not uncommon. The house and laundry of Annie Iwanaga—a girl adopted by two Japanese

Above: Kuma Oki in 1948, age 70, when registered under the Aliens Act 1947. NAA: BP25/1, OKI K Japanese.

migrants—in Cairns was burnt to the ground in 1942. Usually the Controller of Enemy Property had already auctioned off any worthwhile assets at extremely low rates. It is not clear what happened to any of the properties owned by the Oki family, including their café, laundry, or store, but they were not returned to the family after their release.

The story of Kuma's life—and subsequent internment—in north Queensland is remarkable in and of itself, but also reveals a great deal about Australia during the first half of the twentieth century. Stories like Kuma's reveal:

> an even more remarkable narrative of a resident Japanese population spread all over the country, well integrated into every aspect of Australian life and able to travel freely back and forth to Japan, the Pacific and [South East Asia]. This older, pre-war story that has been burned by the war narrates the constant activities of Japanese networks in Australia at diplomatic, international, business, social, local and family levels from the 1860s to the 1940s. (Oliver, *Raids on Australia* 5–6)

While there has been much discussion recently about Alan Tudge's new English language requirements for visa applicants, there has been an equal outpouring from individuals sharing the success stories of Australian migrants who did not speak English. The perceived need to proclaim the commercial success of the "good migrant" is troubling, however, when becoming a heart surgeon or speaking fluent English becomes a requirement of being a contributing member of Australian society. Kuma's life was altogether quiet and humble, where she operated a small café for sugar cane workers in Innisfail during the 1920s and 30s. Remaining a Japanese language speaker did not deter her from making a life in the region. Nor did her unjustified internment stop her from remaining with her family in Australia.

Kuma Oki's experience, along with hundreds of other Japanese migrants living in Australia during 1941, is just one token of the Australian government's treatment of migrants in its short history. The overbearing structures of White

Australia and various "national security" regulations targeted migrants like Kuma and classified them as aliens and maintained their status as "other" to Australian society. A closer look at Kuma's life, however, reveals a woman who travelled thousands of kilometres to Australia and, while her experiences were marked by suspicion and internment, also contained small joys of family, a small local café, and warm bowls of spaghetti.

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