

## The Arai Family of Glen Avon Drive

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The 2013 Greenwich Reads Together selection, Julie Otsuka's, *When the Emperor was Divine*, is a slim, taut novel about members of a Japanese American family who in 1942 are reclassified as enemy aliens and sent to a Utah desert internment camp.

As the events unfold for the characters in the novel, on the other side of the country in those same years, a very different but in some ways similar experience was unfolding for a Greenwich Japanese American family

But first a little background...

In 1991, one of our interviewers went to the home of Margaret Tabell, a longtime resident of Greenwich, to record her recollections. The interview, entitled "Riverside and Old Greenwich Neighborhoods," is a delightful mix of subjects, beginning with a description of Ms. Tabell's service as an air raid warden during World War II. She tells of going house to house to enforce blackouts and to ensure that every family home was equipped with a bucket of sand, standard issue in case of incendiary bombs. Before long Ms. Tabell recalls her years on Glen Avon Drive in Riverside, turning her attention to "two big old houses" built by a Mr. Arai and a Mr. Murai, two business associates in the silk business who had come from Japan in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The two neighbors prospered as their families grew, but Ms. Tabell's story focuses on the Arais who had a son, "Yoni" (Yoneo) who in time grew up, stayed in the family house, and married a young woman named Mitsu.

It is here that the story becomes relevant to this family's experiences during World War II. After Pearl Harbor, the Arai family, for all their prominence in Greenwich at the time (Yoneo Arai graduated from Harvard in 1912 and was a banker, among other achievements), had to register as enemy aliens. This did not deter them, though, from supporting the war effort.

According to Ms. Tabell's account, Mitsu and Yoneo's son, "Rio" (Ryo), who was in college at the time, enlisted in the military in order to serve his country. While Ms. Tabell recalls that Ryo was taken into the army as a pilot, he was actually with the Military Intelligence Service. He graduated from Camp Savage in Minnesota in December of 1942 and was a member of SEATIC, the Southeast Asia Translation and Interrogation Center, a group credited with strategic Allied victories. Full recognition of their contribution came on October 5, 2010 when the Medal of Honor was awarded to all the Japanese Americans who served during the war. Unfortunately, Ryo Arai did not live to receive this honor. He died in 1986 at sixty-five years of age in Danville, California, his home after leaving Greenwich.

But in 1942, while their son was in Camp Savage and then deployed to the Pacific, Mr. and Mrs. Arai also found a way to contribute. They taught Japanese at Yale to young officers. Ms. Tabell's description of this time for the Arais is not without incident. She recalls that the couple had to stop taking the train between Stamford and New Haven because of opposition from fellow passengers. It seems they were subject to the same xenophobia during their commute that had gripped the rest of the country. After these events, the military intervened to provide safe passage for the Arais from their home in Riverside to the campus.

Mitsu and Yoneo Arai, putting aside any animosity toward them, found solace by opening their home to their students on weekends. Ms. Tabell remembers seeing young officers coming down the street, arriving at the Arais' for the Friday and Saturday nights dinners or the Sunday lunches the husband and wife provided for them. "They were enormously patriotic," Ms. Tabell says of the couple as she ends her recollection of the Arai family of Glen Avon Drive.

*According to newspaper archives and the Arai Family Papers in the Online Archives of California, [www.oac.cdlib.org](http://www.oac.cdlib.org), Yoneo Arai died in Greenwich at ninety-one years of age in 1980. Mitsu Arai died in 1984 at eighty-five after moving to Walnut Creek, California, near her son, Ryo. His service record is located in the Military Intelligence Service Research Center and is readily available on the Website, U.S. Militaria Forum, [www.usmilitariaforum.com](http://www.usmilitariaforum.com), search forum, "incredible Nisei." The history of the Nisei of World War II can be found on Wikipedia.*