Nikkei
national museum
& cultural centre
日系文化センター・博物館

Best-Practices Guide for Interviewing Elders

A Nikkei Japanese Canadian Resource

Why Elders' Stories Matter

For the Nikkei community, elders are living bridges to histories of immigration, resilience, injustice, and cultural survival. Many elders carry memories of:

- **Pre-war life** in fishing villages, farming communities, or Powell Street in Vancouver.
- **Internment and uprooting**—being forced from their homes, sent to camps, or relocated to sugar beet farms.
- **Rebuilding**—starting over after dispossession, often with nothing.
- **Preserving culture**—celebrating Obon, Oshogatsu, or Japanese Canadian picnics while adapting to Canadian life.
- **Community resilience**—judo clubs, baseball leagues, Buddhist temples, and Christian churches that became centers of belonging.

Capturing these stories preserves more than history. It preserves identity, dignity, and a sense of belonging for generations to come.

Preparing with Care

- Do some background research:
  Before visiting, learn basic timelines of Japanese Canadian history. Knowing terms like *Nikkei*, *Issei* (first generation), *Nisei* (second generation), and *Sansei* (third generation) shows awareness and respect.

- Clarify intentions:
  Be open about why you want to record their story.

  For example:
  "We want to preserve our family's story so that my children and grandchildren will always know where we came from."
  "The Nikkei Museum is helping families record their stories so they won't be lost."

- Plan the environment:
  A warm cup of tea, sitting at the kitchen table, or walking in the garden may feel more natural than a staged interview setup.

Showing Respect

- Start with gratitude: A simple bow of the head, a thank-you card, or bringing fruit (*mikan* oranges are traditional gifts) sets a tone of respect.

- Honorifics: Use "-san" unless invited otherwise. Elders may appreciate being addressed as *Obaasan* (grandmother) or *Ojiisan* (grandfather) when appropriate.

- Listen with patience: Japanese Canadians often express meaning indirectly or with pauses. Do not rush them to "get to the point."

- Cultural humility: Some elders may be modest about achievements. They may say, "Oh, nothing special." Encourage gently without insisting.

Asking Thoughtful Questions

Questions should invite storytelling, not one-word answers. Below are sample questions tied to Nikkei life and history:

Childhood & Family Life

- What games did you play as a child? Did you play *kendama* or *marbles*?
- What foods remind you most of your childhood? Who cooked them?
- Did your family celebrate Oshogatsu (New Year)? What traditions do you remember?
- Who in your family was the best storyteller? What stories did they tell?

Pre-War Communities

- What do you remember about Powell Street, Steveston, or other places where Japanese Canadians gathered?
- Did your parents or grandparents talk about why they came to Canada?
- What was daily life like in the fishing/farming/lumber communities?

Internment & Relocation (handled gently)

- Would you like to share what happened to your family during the war?
- Do you remember the day you had to leave your home?
- What was life like in the camps or on the farms?
- Were there moments of kindness or community during that time?

Rebuilding & Resilience

- How did your family start over after the war?
- What was it like to build a new life with so little?
- What role did sports, judo, or baseball play in bringing people together?
- Were there community leaders who inspired you?

Identity & Legacy

- What do you feel most proud of when you think of your life?
- What lessons would you like younger generations to carry forward?
- What Japanese values or traditions do you hope we keep alive?
- What advice would you give to your grandchildren or great-grandchildren?

Handling Difficult Stories

Some elders may carry trauma from internment, racism, or loss. Approach these stories with gentleness:

- Instead of "Tell me what happened," ask "Would you like to share what life was like for you then?"
- Respect "No." If they prefer not to speak, move on.
- If emotions arise, pause. Sometimes sitting in silence is the most respectful response.

Recording with Responsibility

- Consent: Always get clear permission. For museum projects, use written consent forms. For family use, verbal consent may be enough.
- Equipment: Phones work fine. Place them close but not intrusive.
- File care: Name files clearly: LastName_FirstName_Year/Date_Topic

  ex: "Yada_William_2025_ChildhoodMemories.mp3."
- Backup: Save to two locations (family computer + cloud).
- Respect edits: If an elder later says, "Please don't share that part," remove it.

Cultural Sensitivity in Practice

- Traditions: Some may want to open or close with a prayer or a song. Invite and record if they are comfortable.
- Language: Elders may switch between Japanese and English. Don't interrupt—those shifts carry meaning.
- Community first: Remember that these stories belong not only to individuals but to the Nikkei community. They are gifts, not commodities.

After the Interview

- Say thank you properly: Send a photo, card, or small gift afterward. This is culturally valued.
- Share copies: Give them and their family access to the recording. If it's for an archives, explain how their story will live on.
- Return: Visit again. Many elders have more to share once trust deepens.

Example Story Fragment

"When I was ten years old, they told us we had to leave our house in Vancouver. My father had just fixed the garden, and my mother had made manju the day before. We were sent to Slocan. I remember the cold winters, but also the kindness of neighbors who shared food. Even though we lost everything, we still gathered for Obon dances. That's how we survived—with community."

This kind of memory blends loss with resilience, which is central to the Nikkei story.

Your Role

As a listener and recorder, you are:

- A guardian of memory.
- A bridge between generations.
- A student of resilience.
- A companion in storytelling, not just an interviewer.

Final Thought

When you sit with an elder, you're not just gathering facts—you're participating in a sacred act of preservation. Each story you capture strengthens the Nikkei community, honours those who came before, and offers future generations both caution and inspiration.

Your role is simple, but profound: listen with heart, record with care, and give back with gratitude.