

national

Volunteers help international Internet project reach into Japan

Seniors' wisdom recorded

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Surrounded by record players and speakers that he designed and built on his own, Takeshi Teragaki, 86, a renowned sound system engineer, began to talk about how he first became intrigued by audio players.

An interviewer set up a small digital video camera to record Teragaki. The footage would later be edited and uploaded on the Internet.

"When I was young, I read an article about record producing machines and how several hundred watts were used to carve the record groove," he says. "I felt by intuition that that was a huge amount of power."

This led Teragaki, who later served as an adviser to such companies as major office equipment makers Ricoh Co. and Canon Inc., to think that the record players of the day might not have the technological wherewithal to play the abundant information of sound that was being pressed into records.

"What I thought was that record players may not have been perfected," Teragaki

says. "That's why I thought I would be the one to do it."

Teragaki's interview in his office in Ota Ward, Tokyo, was part of a project by Memoro — the Bank of Memories, a non-profit organization that records interviews of elderly people about their lives and careers and posts them on its website.

The project was launched by four Italians, all in their 30s, in the northern city of Torino in 2007. It has spread to 11 countries, including Japan, the United States, Germany and Spain, and more than 3,500 video clips have been uploaded on the Internet.

"We want to link the ties between generations by sharing memories of the past," said Naoko Tomita, president of the organization's Japan branch.

Tomita, who runs a company that helps people create a book of their family's history, which she described as a way to hand down one's experiences to the next generation, learned of the Italian project through a newspaper article in October 2009, before anything had been launched in Japan.

"The idea was just what I

was trying to do in my business," she said. "I had to do something to help."

It was all volunteer work. Tomita and a few others who thought the project was a great idea gathered whenever they found the time to prepare for a Japanese version of the website. It was finally launched last March.

The Japanese version started out with 29 video clips containing interviews of Japanese aged 70 or older. As of December, 43 people between the ages of 70 and 101 had been interviewed, increasing the number of videos to about 150. The age criterion was lowered to 60 in December.

In one clip, 87-year-old Nobuko Suzuki talks about how her husband committed suicide after falling deep into debt following Japan's defeat in World War II.

"Before he committed suicide, he asked me if I had enough money and whether the children were doing fine," Suzuki says. "The hardest part was catching his scent from his clothes. I missed him so much."

Suzuki goes on to recount how she worked nonstop at a

dance hall and as a hotel waitress to support her family, and her experience in a 1945 air raid in Yokohama. The interview is divided into seven clips, each about five minutes long.

In another interview, Shigeru Okada, 77, recalls how his house was destroyed by an air raid. He was a junior high school student at the time.

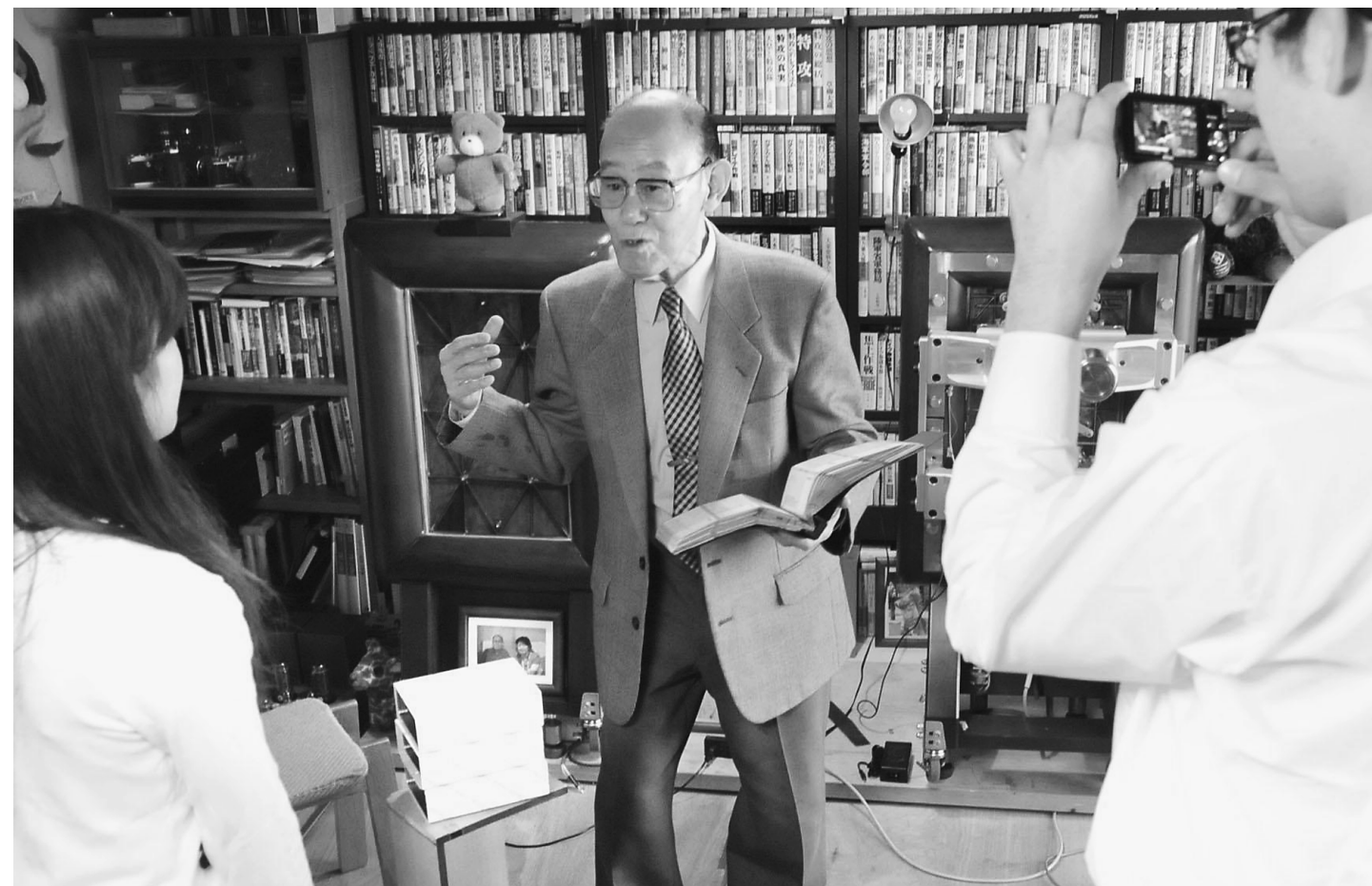
"It sounded like heavy rain was pouring," Okada says of the incendiary bombs. "Blobs of burning oil smaller than golf balls would fall and start fires everywhere."

Okada and his family survived, but all that was left of their house was burned rice in an iron bowl prepared the day before to be cooked in the morning, he says.

Not all of the interviews are about wartime experiences or past hardships. In one video on the U.S. site, Carmine Cafasso, 77, talks about how people dated in the old days, attended Mass together, took walks on the beach and went dancing.

"The priest would come by and say 'You're dancing too close. Leave room for the Holy Spirit,'" he chuckles.

About 20 volunteers are



Sounding off: Takeshi Teragaki, an 86-year-old audio system engineer, talks about his career during an interview with the nonprofit organization Memoro on Dec. 20 in Ota Ward, Tokyo. SATOKO KAWASAKI

working on Japan's Memoro project, some of them university students.

"It's interesting to listen to elderly people who lived completely different lives from mine," said Reiko Shimazaki, a university student in Tokyo

who interviewed Teragaki.

To at least cover the administrative costs, Tomita is planning to lure corporate sponsors by interviewing their retired workers on how the company expanded into what it is today.

That business model is working for Memoro's Italian site. The organization has interviewed retired employees of major beer brewer Peroni about the early days and uploaded the footage along with the company's history.

In the future, Tomita hopes the video clips will be utilized as educational material at schools.

"With the project, children living 100 years later would be able to listen to the experiences of today's elderly," she said.