

FIFTY YEARS' COMMEMORATION OF JAPANESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT  
(Binghamton University, February 22, 1992)

I would first like to thank Bill Kim for inviting me here, and also thank all those who organized this event in remembrance of this 50 years' commemoration of Japanese American internment during World War II. That you students would think this event important enough to rally around - when I understand there aren't that many Japanese American students here, says a great deal about yourself. It says, that YOU, as Asian Americans, are concerned about anything that has happened, or is happening, or might happen to Asians in this country. I am impressed, and congratulate you - for it shows a solidarity among Asian students, and I hope that solidarity and concern will grow to include all ethnics and **non**-ethnics who may become victims of injustice.

As a Japanese American, I thank you because this 50 years' commemoration is something deeply significant to all peoples of Japanese background because so much sorrow and hardship were visited upon us just because of our ancestry.

At this time in February, across this country wherever a sizeable number of Japanese people reside, they are remembering what took place 50 years ago. It is amazing how quickly 50 years can slide by, but it cannot dim what happened.

I am not sure how well acquainted you are about the Japanese American war-time story, so I will just start at the beginning. And I will intersperse it with my own family's story that you can see it more graphically.

On February 19, 1942, the then President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, issued an Executive Order 9066, a very special order, which in brief, gave permission to the highest military official on the West Coast, Gen. DeWitt, the right to evacuate everyone of Japanese ancestry from the states of California, Oregon, Washington, and parts of Arizona as it was a strategic defense area. Every man, woman, and child, whether citizen or not, who was even part Japanese was to be removed in a matter of a few months.

Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor in Honolulu on December 7,

1941, destroying half of the ~~American Navy~~ <sup>Pacific Fleet</sup> which was stationed there, killing some 2000 sailors. This act was called "a stab in the back--a surprise attack. However, today - documents refute that, but we won't have time to go into that aspect. President Roosevelt ~~named~~ <sup>called</sup> December 7th, a Day of Infamy. (Please remember we, Japanese Americans had nothing to do with the bombing. We were and are Americans). But you can imagine the hysteria that swept the Hawaiian Islands and the entire United States, particularly the West Coast. Hawaii was not yet a state; it was a U.S. Territory. Never had an enemy come so close to the continental U.S. Never had the American military been challenged in such an awesome manner. And because the enemies looked just like some of the people living on the West Coast - that is, people of Japanese ancestry, America went into an uproar. Fear, hysteria, and hate took over. Rumors, unconfirmed reports of sabotage and espionage were flying wildly.

There is a saying that "the first casualty in war is Truth" and so it was. Racism and violence followed. Many of the people who were fired at, beaten up, and even one who was killed, was not a Japanese, but a Chinese in the state of Washington. To safeguard themselves, some Asians wore buttons, "I'm not a Jap."

On December 7th, while Japanese planes were bombing Pearl Harbor, 3 FBI-men came to our house, asked for my father, who had just come from the hospital the day before from ulcer surgery, told him to put on his slippers and bathrobes, and whisked him away to a Federal prison. 1,300 first generation Japanese/or Isseis were picked up in the first 24 hours. The U.S. government had a list of names and their whereabouts. The Japanese community was paranoid, wondering who would be taken next.

My older brother was trying to take over my father's fish market, but the money in the bank became frozen so he closed the business. My twin brother, attending the Univ. of California at Berkeley phoned to say that all Japanese students were asked to leave the campus, but the bus and train companies didn't want to sell them tickets. We told him to come home any way you can. He did, and immediately volunteered in the Army. I, myself, tried to hang on to a Woolworth 5 & 10 job as long as I could. I and



four other Niseis (or JAs) belonged to the Women's Ambulance Defense Corp of America (which preceded the WACS), but they asked us to leave.

My Nisei friends were losing their jobs; also quitting school. Japanese businesses were folding up. The feeling against the Japanese was becoming more hateful. The newspapers were calling for "Japs to be ousted from the West Coast." The churches were silent. Many Americans of whatever color were afraid to befriend Japanese. They would be called "Jap lovers" or unpatriotic. Even long-time friends shied away. We could understand. The hysteria of that time was volatile. The strongest anti-Japanese feelings came from the American Legion, Sons and Daughters of the Golden West, the realtors, and even the so-called radical groups like the Communist Party turned their backs on the Japanese. Yet, perhaps, all Japanese had some personal friends who stayed by them.

My father died in January of 1942. My twin brother went off to basic training in Wyoming. In February the 9066 Executive Order set the uprootment process rolling. There was no trial or hearing. In April, my mother, older brother and I were evacuated by car caravan to Santa Anita Assembly Center. Relocation Camps (which we called Concentration Camps) were not built yet. As the largest such center, Santa Anita held 20,000 people. We were allowed to take only what we could carry in our hands. It was mostly beddings and clothes. Radios, cameras, knives and forks were contraband.

Because it was a race track, we were quartered in horse stalls. Many people, especially the elderly became sick. We ate in army-style mess halls, used community laterines and washrooms. But in that temporary quarter, there was a make-shift school, church, and hospital. I worked in the hospital as a nurse's aid. The first hospital was the race-track garage; later we used the building where horses used to be washed. My brother worked at the commissary. My mother tried to fix up our unit, the horse stall, with carton boxes for chairs and table.

After 7 months, the camps in the hinterlands were completed.

120,000 Japanese were dispersed to 10 Centers (euphemism for Concentration Camps), and some 16 more small internment camps.

My mother, brother and I were sent to Arkansas in the swamplands surrounded by forests. Others were sent to Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, Utah, and Idaho. Two of the camps were built on the outskirts of California in the desert. And there, way out in no-man's land, invisible to mainstream America, the Japanese survived dust-storms, sand-storms, torrid summers, and freezing winters. *1,842 people died in camp; 7 shot to death by guards; 30 others shot by wounded. 1,000 went to mental inst. & tib. sanitariums; 200 went to prison - 100 bec. they could not serve the U.S. wh. their parents were in camp.*

But we are proud that 1,500 young Nisei men volunteered from "behind barbed wires" into the U.S. army - to join a special outfit that grew to 10,000, the All-Japanese American 442nd Combat Team, that fought in Europe and became recognized as the most highly decorated unit for its size and length of service in U.S. history. They paid a heavy price with an incredible casualty rate of 308 percent which is unheard of. Also some 6,000 Niseis fought in the South Pacific as military intelligence-men, interpreting enemy communications, interrogating Japanese POWs, and deciphering enemy codes. These MIS-men were the secret weapon in the South Pacific, and are credited with shortening the war by two years.

In all, 33,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry, including women, served in the U.S. military in World War II. The irony that they did so, despite the fact that their families were imprisoned in the U.S. concentration camps under armed guards wearing the same uniform...must be remembered.

That it took 20 - 25 years before a movement to fight for redress/reparation could be organized should be understandable. Those first 20 - 25 years after returning home from the war was to locate, or relocate, make adjustments, and start anew with life; begin a family, find jobs, become financially independent, ~~begin a family~~, become accepted by the post-war society, and feel some measure of security and well-being.

At the beginning, to actually win redress from this government was perhaps thought unlikely, but all those who became involved felt that many hidden truths must be revealed; that "their side of the story" must be told; that independent investigations must



be made; that the American public must be educated; and that our children must know what the first and second generation had undergone; and ultimately, reinforce that such an injustice and humiliation must never happen to any other group.

Happily, our children became keenly interested. It was this Sansei, or third generation, whose enthusiasm, zeal, political savvy (learned from the civil rights era), and commitment that brought forth a grassroot movement in the communities and college campuses. It was the Asian American students (like yourselves) after the victory for Ethnic Studies, who literally carried the redress movement to the fore. They first began in ~~1971~~<sup>1970</sup> with pilgrimages to camps accessible in California (like Manzanar and Tule Lake). By mid 70's, Day of Remembrances were taking place across the country in Japanese communities, although they could not make pilgrimages.

What were our objectives and why? Why did we seek redress? The evacuation and incarceration were solely on racial grounds. There were no criminal charges; no indictments; no trials; no due process. There were gross violations of the Bill of Rights.

Which rights were violated? Freedom of religion, speech, press, right to assemble. Freedom from unreasonable searches. Taken away were our right to life, liberty, and property.

What are the basis for these claims?

Defamation of character, false eviction, false imprisonment; loss of mobility, income, educational opportunities, health (some, their life); emotional and psychological damage; damage to ethnic identity; disruption of family life, education, work; loss of dignity, human rights, civil rights, and the recognition that we were Americans by birthright and our own acclaim.

What did we wish to gain?

Compensation of sufficient magnitude to create public awareness of the violations of constitutional rights, and desire to prevent similar injustices in the future to others.

We Japanese Americans were not the only ones who were removed from our homes during World War II. The Aleuts who were living in the Pribilof and Aleutian Islands were forced from their islands in June and July of 1942, and in less than 24 hours notice, were shipped to abandoned mining camps in Southeast Alaska.

They were exposed to bitter climate, inadequate shelter, almost no sanitary facilities, contaminated water, no privacy, no facility for education or recreation; no electricity, no supplies; filth beyond description with overflowing garbage and excreta everywhere because of lack of toilet facilities. It was utterly devastating and dehumanizing. The death toll was 1 out of 10, dying of tuberculosis, pneumonia, food poisoning, and general medical neglect. Economic losses and personal damages were never compensated for.

While they were gone, their houses were pillaged and ransacked by the American military. Their cherished family and religious mementoes were taken by Americans as souvenirs. Homes were unusable or burned down. Whole communities were destroyed. Many family members never saw each other again. The Aleuts, being U.S. citizens, were also subject to draft even from the mining camps. When Attu was stormed to be liberated from the Japanese, they were led by Aleut scouts. There were no record of how many Aleuts died. No monetary amount could compensate for the psychological or physical damage, economic or material losses, or deterioration of health. But compensation was a must. So many were never located. The U.S. at first<sup>was</sup> only going to give them a paltry \$5,000. In the end they were awarded \$12,000.

While these two groups, the Japanese and the Aleuts were pursuing for redress, the Hawaiians were also fighting for restitution for loss of lands, destruction of their culture and identity, and for the demeaning jobs that were their lot. Although there were hearings as was done for the Japanese, in the end they were not considered for redress. The government defended itself; suggesting the native Hawaiians had given up "aboriginal title" to their land by the time it was annexed by the U.S. However, the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by the U.S. in 1893 is a blot on America's honor which Hawaiians today feel ~~must~~ U.S. must make restitution for.

In Canada, where Japanese Canadians underwent similar uprootment, they began their movement later than here in the U.S., but were able to convince their government in much shorter time of the wrongs committed. \$21,000 in Canadian dollars were paid to



some 12,000 survivors from the 26,000 West Coast Japanese Canadians who were uprooted and dispersed across the interior of British Columbia. The farms, fishing boats, homes and other property seized from the wartime internees amounted to about \$330 million. They were later sold by the government.

Canada's Chinese also began a campaign for redress, but also to educate Canadians of their government's racist policy that made <sup>the Chinese</sup> ~~them~~ the only group to pay a head tax. In a short time, some 2000 Chinese - the bulk from Vancouver and <sup>mostly elderly men</sup> Toronto - registered with copies of the original head tax certificate. The head tax was \$50 in 1885 (considered a large amount then); and raised to \$100 by 1901; and was increased to \$500 in 1904. By 1923, new restrictive immigration legislation stopped all Chinese <sup>from</sup> entering Canada. Between 1885 and 1923 an estimated \$0 million dollars in head tax was collected. However, the Canadian government would not commit itself to any form of restitution.

The inequities foisted on ethnic peoples should show us the duality of life in the Western World. But it is not only in the West, nor by whites that peoples of whatever color are discriminated against. In Japan, the treatment of Koreans, the Ainu, the Okinawans, and their own who they call the Burakumin, are shamefully maltreated. The worst has been to the Koreans.

Two million Koreans were forced to Japan as slave laborers, and held in brutal servitude and humiliating circumstances. Some 50,000 were also atom bombed, information that the Japanese government withheld from the world until Korean reporters finally exposed it in the 60's. Thousand of Koreans are still on Sakalin Island where they have worked the mines <sup>during</sup> ~~from~~ the war years. The most abominable of war stories is that 200,000 Korean women were taken to Japan on the pretext of employment, and instead sent to the Pacific war zones to sexually serve Japanese soldiers. These women, <sup>euphemistically</sup> ~~once called~~ "comfort girls" are now bringing suits against the Japanese government for redress. Korea's Pres. Roh, himself, is demanding compensation for the women whose lives were shattered and disgraced. Let's hope the women who were so abused win from a nation <sup>Japan</sup> who could so callously forget the lives they destroyed.

Right here in the U.S. there is a dynamic, growing redress movement by African Americans for reparation and restitution for the kidnap, forced removal, enslavement; immoral and inhumane deprivation of life, liberty and cultural heritage;...to redress human rights violations that have not diminished despite the passage of time; injurious results of human slavery and of government sanctioned war, exploitation and discrimination to heirs of slaves. There is no statute of limitation to crimes of genocide.

This Black Reparation movement is already supported and endorsed by the Congressional Black Caucus, the Black Legal Community, a good percent of Black professionals, sectors of the Black working class, and moving into the religious communities.

It must be supported by all of us; by all who are aware of the terrible wrong that was perpetrated on a whole race of people who have been derogated, looked down with contempt, often isolated or segregated, exploited, stigmatized, and categorically and deliberately maltreated and denied to calculatedly bring about destruction of their life, both individually and as a group.

Redressing a wrong is the obligation and responsibility of a nation to correct and compensate for evils, abuses, affliction; to make amends for wrongdoings. Reparations is the actual payment in money, labor or goods to restore, repair, or compensate for damage done to people and their property.

Redress and reparation is a justice issue. Justice is about being righteous, impartial and fair; the quality of being right or correct; being able to see or discern when someone or a group is being treated unfairly or negatively. Thus, we are all part of a process that will provide justice or injustice. We are the vehicle that can help to bring about justice - by our vigilance, our concern, our action. Sometimes it takes courage just to speak out in behalf of others.

Fifty years ago, 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were uprooted, evacuated and incarcerated because of racism, hysteria, and the failure of political leadership. Those three criterias came out of the summation of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians.



It took 46 years for the U.S. government to admit they did wrong; to apologize, and actually award us with monetary compensation in 1990 and 1991. It was a tremendous victory, an unexpected conclusion to a critical moment in American history; and also to the Asian American experience. However, we cannot forget that nearly 50 percent of the people, 55 - 60,000 of our internment compatriots had died.

One of the reasons we won, we feel, is because we gained continuous support by non-Japanese. They are organizations and individuals from every background: The Congressional Black Caucus, Natl. Assoc. for the Advan. of Colored People; B'nai B'rith, American Jewish Congress; the Quakers, Brethren Service Committee, and the Pauite Indians who joined the JAs each year at the pilgrimage in Manzanar. In the 80's, the Protestant and Catholic churches also gave support.

Also individuals like: Hung Wai Ching, a Chinese American Director of the Nuuanu YMCA in Honolulu; Col. Young Oak Kim, a Korean American officer who fought with the Japanese American Combat Team; Earl M. Finch, a white Mississippian who was called the "Father of the 442"; Dorothy Day, the great leader of the Catholic Worker, who went out alone to the Manzanar desert camp, carrying a placard protesting the incarceration.

Tomorrow in New York City, we are honoring one of these "friends of the JAs" who did something unusual. He is Ralph Lazo, a Mexican American who as a 16-year old teen-ager, voluntarily went into Manzanar, staying 2 1/2 years because he "loved the Japanese people, and he felt it was wrong for the U.S. government to incarcerate the JAs. He wanted to go through whatever the Nikkeis would undergo. And he did. It is because of people like him, that enriched and inspired the JAs during those dark years, that reinforced the Nikkeis to pursue for redress, and ultimately concluded in victory.

And we thank students like you who took time to come here today to hear this World War II story of the Japanese Americans. It is a story of an injustice done, but which through unity and struggle, was <sup>finally somewhat</sup> rectified. *The lesson is - it must never happen again.* It shows that sometimes justice can be won - if we fight hard enough for it.

Yuri Kochiyama