



# National Council on Redress for Japanese Americans

925 W. Diversey Parkway, Chicago, IL 60614

"Well, friends, this is an historic occasion."

Ben Zelenko

May 12, 1981

Dear Friends,

On May 5, 1981, Children's Day, I signed a letter retaining the law firm of Landis, Cohen, Singman and Rauh to initiate legal proceedings against the United States of America for the purpose of obtaining compensation for the class of Japanese-Americans who were interned in concentration camps during WWII in violation of their civil and constitutional rights. Included with the letter was a check for \$15,000. The first phase of legal preparation will take about one year. During this phase, we will make monthly payments of \$5,000, so that at its completion we shall have paid \$75,000.

(Of course, we shall have paid this sum if we have raised it. More precisely, if you have made your contribution.)

It was about two weeks earlier, April 22nd, in Washington, DC, that Ben Zelenko, one of the senior partners of Landis, Cohen, Singman and Rauh, made his observation. We had completed revisions and received clarifications of the letter of retention. But we had not yet reached our initial goal of \$30,000. We were at \$29,000. We were confident that this goal would be reached imminently.

(We had decided at the beginning of our fund appeal to accept the discipline of raising \$30,000 before proceeding in order to determine if we had support "out there." Without that support, we would have quit.)

Earlier in that day, we had met with the Asian Pacific American Federal Employees Council to discuss the redress movement. The APAFEC meeting was the prime reason for the trip. But we thought we'd kill two birds with one stone, that stone being the rather stiff air fare. APAFEC meets for a bag lunch together, encouragingly austere. It was a good meeting. NCJAR is becoming recognized and accepted as a substantial force in the movement for J-A redress.

(We have over 250 contributors to our Redress Legal Fund. Most of them were not readers of this newsletter. More than 100 of them have contributed \$100 or more. Twelve are Ronin, contributing \$1,000 or more.)

As it turned out, there was a third bird, the National Archives. I used to make these trips to Washington single day affairs, which took most of the morning for travel. But I've come so to enjoy my visits with Aiko and Jack Herzig and their comfortable hospitality, that I've been mixing business with pleasure and arrive the night before and stay over with them. It was Aiko, our Washington representative, who made the arrangements at the National Archives with Director James Paulauskas for my examination of the Hohri family's personal records. We went there in the morning.



Mr. Paulauskas and his staff represent the best aspect of the imposing Washington bureaucracy; they are friendly servants of the people. He personally escorted us to the WRA (War Relocation Authority) section of the mammoth innards. I found the Hohri family records. He also showed me copies of the initial, mimeographed editions of the Manzanar Free Press, which contained drawings by my brother Sohei. And I was able to locate the report of the famous softball game, in which we, the Dusty 9, were defeated by Terminal Island 42 to 2, the 2 runs being made in the ninth inning when we were reduced to playing against grade school children to complete our humiliation.

So, after the National Archives and the APAFEC meeting and hamburgers for lunch, we met with Ben Zelenko and Mike Rauh of Landis, Cohen, Singman and Rauh. I came away with a much better sense of the two senior partners and of our total liability, including those costs which we would incur were we to succeed in establishing standing in the Courts. Getting into Court -- i.e., not getting tossed out -- is our major problem and highest risk. We must overcome the statute of limitations and other legal obstacles. If we succeed, we shall incur the costs of taking depositions and of notifying the rather large class of victims. We could only approximate these costs. They will run into the few tens of thousands. Most of this would be notification of the class which is reimburseable, provided we win. I must say that I am a lot less intimidated by this potential future cost than I was six months ago by the prospect of raising \$75,000.

(Now that we reached \$30,000, we have also received a grant of \$7,500 from the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries of the United Church of Christ. This pushes our total to \$37,500 or one-half of \$75,000. And the contributions keep coming in, so we are getting close to \$40,000.)

Meanwhile, Harry Nagaoka, our hard-working treasurer and maintainer of our computerized mailing list and accounts, unseen, unsung, and extremely vital, was taking a much needed vacation. When he returned on April 25th, we learned that we'd acquired a twelfth Ronin, plus several more contributions. We'd gone over the top.

(Whoopie!)

We had only to wait for the new letter of retention and put together the \$15,000 and untangle a few, seemingly inevitable last minute snags. We were aiming for May 1st, which has some symbolic significance. But May 5th, the day it happened, may be most appropriate. So many of us were, after all, children at that time. And what more can we hope of our children than that in their future, in their prime of life, that they join in the struggle for justice as part of their own self-realization.

Peace,

*William Hohri*  
William Hohri



**Volunteer Internee****Ralph Lazo Also Remembers Manzanar**

By BEVERLY BEYETTE,  
Times Staff Writer

America's only non-Japanese evacuee, Ralph Lazo, 18, of Los Angeles will leave Manzanar Relocation Center soon to join the United States Army . . .

—News release from Department of the Interior, War Relocation Authority, August, 1944.

If there was a moment of truth, an instant in which Ralph Lazo had determined that he would go with his Japanese-American friends to internment camp, perhaps it was during a wartime winter day in 1942 when he was helping a neighbor at an "evacuation sale."

The neighbors had been forced to sell their property, as they would be able to take only what fit in their suitcases when they went to the relocation center.

As Lazo helped a buyer load a lawnmower into his car, the buyer, pleased to have profited by someone's misfortune, turned to him and said, "I sure jewed that Jap!"

**Multi-Ethnic Neighborhood**

Lazo, a Mexican-American, was stunned. The Temple Street neighborhood in which he'd grown up was a multi-ethnic mix of Basques, Jews, Japanese-Americans. He'd played basketball on a Filipino Community Church team.

Central Junior High was within walking distance to Little Tokyo and Lazo had often shared meals at the homes of Japanese-American friends. "I fit in very well," he recalls. "I was peaceful, easygoing. We developed this beautiful friendship."

Now, by government order, his friends were to be taken away from their homes, forced to sell or abandon their property. "It was immoral," says Lazo, "it was wrong, and I couldn't accept it."

"These people hadn't done anything that I hadn't done, except to go to Japanese language school. They were Americans, just like I am."

One day Lazo was having lunch at Belmont High with some of these friends when one, Isao Kudow, turned to him and asked, "Ralph, what are you going to do without us? Why don't you come along?"

Lazo, at 16, needed no further prodding. "I went down to the old Santa Fe Station and signed on" (with the Wartime Civil Control Administration). That was early in 1942.

He did not have to lie, to tell officials that he was of Japanese ancestry. "They didn't ask," he says. He grins. "Being brown has its advantages."

Looking back, Lazo figures there was little chance anyone was going to ask questions—"They wanted these people in."

For the next two years, Lazo would live at Manzanar, the relocation camp behind barbed wire fences in the dusty, desolate Owens Valley. There he would graduate from high school (Manzanar class of '44), play football, emcee Saturday night dances in the rec hall, learn to speak a little Japanese.

**'Just Like Jap Friends'**

After the war, he would be singled out by some as a sympathizer—"a Jap, just like his Jap friends."

Sure, it hurt. But "I knew right from wrong," says Lazo. Then he smiles and says, "I'm one-eighth Irish. Sometimes it shows."

Lazo is 55 now and for 11 years has been a counselor at Los Angeles Valley College. He is reticent about what he did almost 40 years ago and asks repeatedly, "Please write about the injustice of the evacuation. This is the real issue. Ralph Lazo is just a consequence."

He emphasizes, "This is a very personal thing. No books are going to be written. No pictures are going to be made."

He repeats, "I'm a very quiet, private person. I blend in real well with my Nisei friends."

**Strong Bonds Remain**

Those bonds have remained strong. Last June, Lazo attended the 36th reunion of the Manzanar class of '44 at the New Otani Hotel. The table centerpieces, auctioned off, were replicas of the watchtowers from which military police had kept their 24-hour guard over the internees. Ralph Lazo, one-time yell leader, led a Manzanar spellout—"Give me an M . . ."

It was a good day—"There was this great feeling of having shared a common experi-

Los Angeles Times  
April 2, 1981



LARRY ARMSTRONG / Los Angeles Times

As a teen-ager, Ralph Lazo, 55, was the only non-Japanese in internment camp.



# INTERNEEE: Volunteer Remembers

Continued from First Page

ence, unjust as it might have been," says Lazo. "But those years of camp, it's showing on us. There's too much illness, too many of us divorced."

Lazo is also one of 10 contributors who have given \$1,000 or more to a fund to be used for preparation of a class-action lawsuit against the U.S. government, seeking financial compensation for all of the living among the 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry who were interned.

In little ways, he thinks of himself as part Japanese. "Every once in a while," says Lazo, who now lives in the San Fernando Valley, "I go down to Little Tokyo, treat myself by going into the Kyoto Drugstore and ordering sushi. It brings back fond memories."

But his involvement with the Japanese-American community has been private, quiet. It is a pattern that began in the '50s. "The '50s weren't the most open time," says Lazo. "I had to be careful, not for me—I can take care of myself—but for my children."

Beyond that, there is his conviction that Ralph Lazo did nothing more than stand up for what he believed in, the least he expects of any human being.

The heroes, he'll tell you, are the men, women and children who were imprisoned behind that barbed wire, who lived there with dignity.

"I was different," he says. "I could have walked out."

It is to bring to the public's attention the cause of these people, and what he views as the terrible injustices they suffered, that Lazo has agreed to make what he calls "my first public appearance" as America's only non-Japanese evacuee. He will participate in a conference Friday and Saturday at Whittier College, where leading authorities on Japanese-American history will gather to discuss internment.

Although he insists of the camp experience, "I just went along for the ride," he wants people to remember that it happened and that people suffered, physically, financially and psychologically. "To most people," he says, "when the camps were gone, they were gone."

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In Spanish, Manzanar means "apple orchard," but it was a barren desertland in the Owens Valley, its water long since diverted to Los Angeles, to which the evacuees were moved in the spring of 1942, soon after President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066.

That order, in essence, gave the War Department authority to define certain areas of the West Coast as war zones and to evacuate from these areas all persons of Japanese, German or Italian ancestry.

No Germans or Italians were ever evacuated. But on the premise that there was a real threat of a Japanese invasion of the West Coast, the mass evacuation of persons of Japanese ancestry was begun that March.

No one was exempt. Young and old, sick and well, doctors, lawyers, professors, farmers and fishermen were sent to what were officially termed "relocation centers," but which the internees call concentration camps.

Frank Chuman points out in his 1976 book, "The Bamboo People," written as part of UCLA's Japanese-American Research Project:

"Not one of these people had been accused, indicted or convicted of any illegal or criminal act in any court." Further, notes Chuman, they were sent to camp without being accorded a hearing, being advised of their civil and Constitutional rights or being given a chance to prove their innocence.

They left behind unharvested crops, beached fishing boats, they forfeited mortgages and they lost leases. Total property losses have been estimated at more than \$400 million.

Says Ralph Lazo, "The individuals who promoted the evacuation were jealous of the competition of the Japanese farmers," resentful of how hard they worked their leased land. "The discrimination earlier against the Chinese moved right over to the Japanese-Americans. The boat people, the Vietnamese, they're the victims now."

Lazo remembers when the posters went up in the community churches, giving instructions for evacuation. "That's when it really hit home."

Until then, fact had been laced with rumor. "We would hear that so-and-so's dad was picked up by the police. Some kids didn't even attend school because they were afraid to go out. Sometimes we'd go to the store and bring these people groceries."

The Army Corps of Engineers built 10 camps in the seven Western states; at their peak they housed 120,000 evacuees, of whom 70,000 were U.S. citizens. Almost all of the 120,000 were longtime residents of the United States and some had relatives serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Lazo remembers, "There were some Niseis (second generation) who'd never before been with so many Japanese. Some of them felt more comfortable with me, even though I was more Japanese than many of the others."

Chuman concludes that the Japanese on the West Coast were "victims of hysteria, misunderstanding and a long-standing racial hatred." Cries for internment came from the American Legion, the California Farm Bureau, from some labor unions.

Syndicated columnist Henry McLeMore of the San Francisco Examiner wrote: "Herd 'em up, pack 'em off and give 'em the inside room in the badlands. Let us have no patience with the enemy or with anyone whose veins carry his blood. . . ."

Columnist Westbrook Pegler agreed. "To hell with habeas corpus," he wrote.

The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce endorsed mass evacuation; Earl Warren, then attorney general of California, warned that disaster was inevitable if the Japanese were not incarcerated.

"It never should have happened," says Lazo. "There was no reason for it. These people weren't a threat. And they didn't need to be protected."

It was, perhaps, prophetic that Ralph Lazo was born in a black hospital in Los Angeles—"the only one that was open at midnight"—and received his early schooling on an Indian reservation in Arizona "with my red brothers." (His father was then with the Santa Fe Railroad).

"The first Lazos landed here in 1519 with Cortes," he says. "I'm the adventurous type. It runs in the family." (He notes in passing that an uncle rode with Pancho Villa.)

Lazo's mother, who was born in Pueblo, Mexico, died when he was 5. His father, John Houston Lazo, a house-painter and muralist (whose work included the Fox West Coast Theaters, churches and restaurants) was busy making a living and Ralph and his older sister were pretty much on their own.

Lazo, who describes himself as "a scrawny kid who took corrective P.E.," delivered Liberty magazine, swept floors at school, collected bottles throughout the neighborhood and returned them for deposit to Mr.



Goldberg's liquor store. "I was a real hustler," he says.

Growing up, he understood that Mexican-Americans were supposed "to keep their place" and once was refused admission to a public swimming pool on the pretext that he needed a health card. Still, he says, he was aware of little overt discrimination toward Hispanics.

When the Jewish children, the children of refugees from Hitler's Germany, arrived in the mid-'30s, he remembers, "We all became big brothers to them." Germans, Japanese, Jews were to be treated the same. "Our teachers valued our differences," he says, "but emphasized that we were all Americans."

When Lazo told his father he had decided to go to camp with his Japanese-American friends, he made it sound a little vague. "I think he thought I meant weekend camp," he says. But when his father learned the youngster was at Manzanar, he made no effort to bring him home.

"My Dad was a very wise man," he says. "He knew I was safe and with friends. You couldn't ask for more protection—barbed wire, searchlights. He probably was very happy I was there."

They corresponded. "I let him know that I was going to school, being well-fed." But visitors were not permitted at Manzanar, so they were to be separated for more than two years.

By the luck of the draw, Lazo went to Manzanar—but most of the friends he had signed up to be with were assigned to the Heart Mountain, Wyo., relocation camp.

Lazo quickly made new friends and, he says, "I was very happy being with people I admired and respected. At first a lot of people thought I was Eurasian. They eventually found out, but they accepted me."

At first he lived in a block with the older bachelors. "I spoke no Japanese, they spoke no English. They were my Issei (first generation) parents. They took care of me." Later, he moved to another block where he was under the watchful eye of the mother of a friend; she, too, wanted to take care of him.

If anyone resented his being there, he says, "Nobody told me. Ralph Merritt, the camp director, said it was all right with him if I wanted to stay. There were 10,000 of us in one square mile. One was no more or less."

#### Held Camp Jobs

Soon Lazo, the hustler, had a camp job, delivering mail for \$12 a month. Later, he was a \$16-a-month recreation director. He was also class president, a so-so student ("Out of 150, I was ranked 150. I didn't mind being 150 in that group") and, frequently, he was the "go-between" in his classmates' romances. "I had the confidence of their parents," he explains.

The class of '44 danced to the music of their own band, the Jive Bombers. They drank gallons of Hawaiian punch and ate stacks of deviled egg sandwiches. They brought trees from the foothills to plant inside the compound.

It was a busy time. "We didn't just sit around and complain," says Lazo. In the summer, the heat was unbearable; in the winter, the sparsely rationed oil didn't adequately heat the tarpaper-covered pine barracks with the knotholes in the floor. The wind would blow so hard it would toss rocks around.

But, Lazo remembers, when everything looked grim, Toyo Miyatake, who saw the world of Manzanar through the lens of his contraband handmade camera, "would always point out the beauty around us." (In 1978, "Two Views of Manzanar," the photos of Miyatake and of Ansel Adams, was an exhibit at UCLA.)

Lazo left the camp only twice, once to appear before his draft board in Lone Pine for induction, once to represent the Manzanar YMCA at a Hi-Y conference in Estes Park, Colo.

It was on the Y trip, he remembers, that he and his Japanese friends were refused service at a Chinese restaurant in Colorado.

William Hohri, now a computer programmer in Chicago, was a classmate of Lazo at Manzanar. "He was one of the most popular people in camp," he recalls. "Everyone got along with him."

Hohri, who was from North Hollywood, met Lazo at camp and they quickly became friends. Says Hohri, "He fit in so well, so comfortably. He didn't make a big deal out of it."

Today, Hohri is spearheading the efforts of the Chicago-based National Council for Japanese-American Redress, which has raised \$27,000 toward initiation of its lawsuit seeking redress for those who were interned.

#### Not Going to Compensate

"It's practically impossible to get anything passed through legislation," says Hohri. "We think the way to go is through the courts." They would leave it to the courts to decide the amount of financial remuneration for each individual.

Lazo supports the council's efforts. Although he speaks of "us," rather than "them," when talking of his camp experiences, he is quick to say, "They are the ones who were offended. What they want, I'll go along with. I think the lawsuit is the only alternative."

"The financial (reparation) is very appropriate, though it's not going to compensate for any aspect. We have to remember that 70,000 of these people were American citizens. No other group has ever been in a situation like this. But the greatest damage was psychological. Young people suddenly realized, 'I'm no good.'"

Lazo tends to remember the positive things that came out of the Manzanar experience, but he does not condone the internment action.

Nor does he gloss over the riots at Manzanar in which two Japanese were killed by guards. He remembers, too, how hot it was, how cold it was, the communal mess halls, the rows of open toilets, the searchlights scanning the fences. The indignities.

Still, he says, he came out with "a lot of wonderful memories, a lot of wonderful friends. And I came out more sensitive than when I went in."

He also came out with the knowledge that "there's money in war. That was one of my disillusionments. The return of the Niseis, the Sanseis, to Los Angeles was a very tragic period, perhaps more so than the evacuation."

"There was no housing; families were living in one hotel room. And there were no jobs for them. You can understand if you had lost someone in the war..."

Finally, he says, there was the trauma of adjusting "after two or three years in a secure environment."

In August, 1944, Ralph Lazo left Manzanar to join the Army. He trained at Camp Roberts, then shipped out of Monterey to the South Pacific during the campaign for liberation of the Philippines.

His job was "beating the bush," rooting out Japanese soldiers who were hiding in the caves in the mountains north of Luzon. "I was a lousy shot," he says, "so they made me a bazooka man."

He says, "The American G.I. couldn't tell the difference between a Japanese and a Filipino. That's why they assigned me. They were killing the Filipinos and letting the Japanese go."

"I did a real good job. I destroyed many lives." He brings out a small box inside which is pinned a Bronze Star, a medal awarded for heroism in combat. What did he do to earn it? Tears well in his eyes as he answers "Kill."

There are scars; he attributes the breakup of his marriage partially to misunderstandings about, and lasting repercussions from, the Manzanar experience.

But there are no regrets, except there having been Manzanar.

Would Lazo do it again?

"I hope nobody ever has to do it again."



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JAPANESE AMERICAN REDRESS**  
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