



Judy Griesedieck — Mercury News

U.S.-born Pete and Aiko Nakahara: He was ostracized, and his family was interned

The Nikkei: hated by both sides

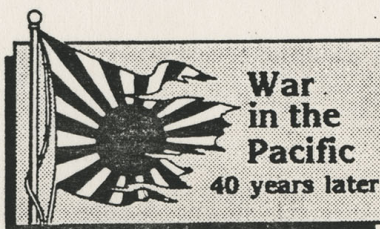
By Teresa Watanabe
Mercury News Staff Writer

On the day the Japanese bombs demolished Pearl Harbor, Pete Nakahara got a taste of what was to come for Americans like him whose parents had been born in Japan.

Sitting in a Berkeley cafe with two friends, Nakahara — then a college student, now a San Jose lawyer — was listening with outrage and shock to news reports of the attack when three men walked by.

Growled one: "If I had a gun, there'd be three dead Japs."

For the next several years, Nakahara would share the special



pain of that group of Americans squeezed by a war between their country and that of their ancestors — the Japanese-Americans, or Nikkei. Facing hatred and recriminations on both sides of the Pacific, they were "Japs" in America and "*imin na kodomo*" — immigrant children — in Japan.

Like his fellow Nikkei, Nakahara eventually proved his loyalty to America. But not before he had lost his father to insanity, endured his mother's internment in an Arkansas camp and written to President Franklin D. Roosevelt protesting military racism.

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He was born May 21, 1921, in the busy shipping and fishing village of San Pedro near Los Angeles. Except for Japanese language school on Saturdays, Pete Nakahara grew up as a typical California boy.

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The Nikkei: hated on both sides of the sea

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Or he thought so until the day he tried to do his American duty and enlist after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Although he was a good student at the University of California at Berkeley and the winner of a statewide extemporaneous speech contest, Nakahara was rejected by the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. They told him they couldn't accept Japanese-American volunteers, but that he might be drafted if his parents would sign a waiver for their son, who was one year shy of his 21st birthday.

His parents did so, and Nakahara was drafted at the end of December 1941. When he reported to Fort McArthur in San Pedro, he was put to work filling sandbags with a group of workers wearing large P's on their shirts. Later he learned they were Army prisoners.

At Fort Warren in Wyoming, he was told he could not go to Iceland with the rest of the regiment because of his ancestry, and he was assigned instead to clean latrines.

Then he got an office job — but lost it after the first day when someone found out he was not Chinese. He was reassigned to unloading boxcars with a handful of other men, all of whom were black.

Finally, he wrote to President Roosevelt, Secretary

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— Pete Nakahara

of War Henry Stimson and Chief of Staff George C. Marshall.

“I said if they didn't trust us, they should put us in a separate combat office and send us to Europe,” recalled the slim, tanned attorney, his voice devoid of bitterness.

“We wanted to prove to the American public that we were loyal Americans and deserving of equal treatment.”

Eventually, he said, they all wrote back and assured him that the Army was truly democratic and that they abhorred discrimination. By that time, his mother, older brother and twin sister were locked up in an internment camp in Jerome, Ark., under government order, and his father had died mysteriously.

Seiichi Nakahara had entered the immigration-detention center on Terminal Island near San Pedro mentally alert and physically healthy, except for occasional asthma. On Dec. 7, 1941, immediately after Pearl Harbor, the entrepreneur, then 56, was arrested by the FBI as an enemy alien.

In 1905, Nakahara had fled poverty in Morioka, a village in northern Japan, and built a prosperous wholesale fish company in San Pedro. His frequent contacts with Japanese shipping firms in the months preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor had aroused the FBI's suspicions.

He sold fresh fish and other food to three Japanese shipping lines, though he also sold to the U.S. Navy. He entertained Japanese officers from the nearby merchant ships, one of whom was suspected by the FBI of being involved in espionage.

As had other Japanese community residents, he had donated money to a Japanese naval fund that was used to finance training missions to the United States. Nakahara also was a radio buff, and he had built two conspicuous aerials in his front yard to catch short-wave radio reports from Japan.

But, his son says today, Seiichi Nakahara was no enemy spy — just a smart businessman who kept up his overseas business contacts and still felt a natural affinity for his homeland.

What happened to his father while in FBI custody remains a mystery, Pete Nakahara said. He has heard reports that his father repeatedly was awakened at 1 a.m. and interrogated for hours, harassed as a “dirty Jap” by other prisoners and given no medicine for his asthma.

All Pete Nakahara knows for sure is that his father lost his mind and no longer recognized his son when he came to visit.

“He refused to talk to me and said I was someone sent there by the FBI looking like his son to question him,” Nakahara said.

On Jan. 20, seven weeks after arresting him, the FBI suddenly declared that the elder Nakahara was not dangerous and released him. He died the next day. The family still does not know what caused his death, and the FBI told his mother not to mention the incident, Nakahara said.

It is the one wartime experience that still leaves Pete Nakahara unsettled.

He said he doesn't feel bitter about his own wartime experiences, but “I did feel a sense of unfairness toward the treatment my father received.”

For his part, Pete Nakahara's fluency in Japanese eventually enabled him to escape what he and the other Nikkei soldiers called their “s--- detail.” He

went to the Philippines to translate captured enemy documents and to broadcast surrender appeals to Japanese troops, and he interrogated Japanese prisoners of war in New Guinea. Later, he served as a court interpreter for the War Crimes Trials in Tokyo and Yokohama.

He married Aiko Umino, a civil service worker from Seattle, and completed law school at Stanford University. He went into private practice with a law firm, since disbanded, with Wayne Kanemoto in San Jose's Japantown.

Kanemoto, a San Jose native and retired Santa Clara County Municipal Court judge, took his oath as a lawyer — pledging to support and defend the U.S. Constitution — while imprisoned in an Arizona desert camp.

After Pearl Harbor, when rumors of a mass internment began to percolate, Kanemoto was a law student at the University of Santa Clara. He wryly recalls his constitutional law professor assuring him



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Retired Judge Wayne Kanemoto

at the time that "they can't do this."

But they did, sending him and his family first to a temporary center at the Santa Anita racetrack in Southern California, then to a permanent camp in Gila River, Ariz.

"Of course you feel you're being treated unfairly," said Kanemoto, who went on to Burma with the Signal Intelligence Outfit of the U.S. Air Force, translating Japanese communications and locating Japa-

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— Wayne Kanemoto

nese radio stations. "But it was wartime. In wartime, people do unreasonable things, including killing people."

Still looking fit, with a mane of white-streaked hair, the 67-year-old Kanemoto makes jokes about his experiences. He likes to say that he is the only lawyer in California sworn in under the shadow of a saguaro cactus.

"I know it was wrong," he said. "I tell people it was wrong. But I accept that everything is not always fair and do my best to correct it."

Pete Nakahara, who now runs his own law firm, echoes those sentiments. The wartime experience has left him with more compassion, he said, and a stronger commitment to speak out against racial intolerance.

He is disturbed, for instance, by what he sees as a resurgence of racism against Asian-Americans, including those of Japanese descent. He attributes that resurgence to trade tensions with Japan and to a backlash against the influx of immigrants from Southeast Asia.

Still, both Nakaharas and Kanemoto prefer to remain upbeat.

"Maybe I'm optimistic," said Pete Nakahara, "but hopefully the American people can accept us as we are and not by stereotyping an image of what they think we are."