

CONCERNED JAPANESE AMERICANS STATEMENT TO COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

July 16, 1981

Washington D.C.

My name is Sasha Hohri. I am representing Concerned Japanese Americans, a New York area local group which is a member of the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations.

For the past two months we have been conducting a campaign for a New York Commission hearing. We have collected hundreds of signatures from Nikkei and non-Nikkei on a petition. We have met with many prospective testifiers. We have contacted other community organizations, encouraging them to circulate petitions among their members and write organizational letters to the Commission for a New York hearing.

We feel that the experience of New York Japanese Americans is unique. Thousands of Japanese Americans reside within the New York area. We are scattered. We have no community as a direct result of the camps.

Part of the history of Japanese Americans, in common with other Third World people, had been the struggle to preserve and maintain our communities as centers of the cultural, social and political life of our people. In a racist society, the community has been a place where Japanese could speak their language, develop and practice their culture, and raise their children to have a sense of ethnic identity and pride. Because of the existence of Japantowns in California, many Japanese Americans living on the East Coast still consider California home.

Internment, forced dispersal, uprootment, loss of identity, invisibility, isolation--all these feelings have been indelibly stamped upon the soul and psyche of Japanese Americans on the East Coast. This is due to the dispersal of Japanese Americans to the East Coast which was forced by history and the camps in particular.

Consciously or unconsciously, Japanese Americans relocated East because it possibly afforded an opportunity to pick up pieces of shattered dreams, ambitions and hopes smashed by the concentration camp experience.

Many evacuees relocated to New York hoping to escape the racist vigilantism and press directed against them; the discrimination and 2nd class citizenship that had marked the experience of Japanese Americans in California. As expressed by one Nisei, "I wanted to get as far away from California as I could."

For others, the East Coast offered an escape from the unbearable camp conditions, as evacuees desiring resettlement were prohibited from returning to California. For many, there was nothing left of their pre-camp lives to return to.

The imposed stigma of being Japanese, the implied danger of associating with other Japanese, in essence, the denial of roots, history and identity, was a conscious policy of the U.S. government. Leave Interview Question dated 8/25/43 is blatant proof of this policy: "What is your plan for mixing into the community to which you will resettle?"



What was the impact of this policy on the relocated evacuees? "Isolation. I couldn't find things to relate to. (It) was a deep emotional hurt."

This policy of assimilationism, of 200% Americanism has had concrete impact. One example is the loss of identity for Sanséi--of growing up unaware of our proud and bitter history; our inability to speak Japanese or understand and promote Japanese culture; shame, guilt and avoidance of other Japanese Americans --these are obstacles Sansei have faced.

The Japanese American success story, so widely promoted and believed, even by us at times, is truly a myth when we cannot be proud of who we are; when our children are still denied the basic educational tools to understand the Japanese American experience; when our culture is suppressed; and when an actual physical Japanese American community seems like a dream.

Justice for the emotional and psychological suffering, the actual losses, must be made now. Reparations --individual monetary payment can begin to make amends for violations of civil and Constitutional rights and compensate for material losses, but can never repair the traumatic impact of the camps on our lives. A community fund can give us a start to rebuild the Japanese American community again.

We have waited too long. We will be quiet no longer. We call upon the Commission to make these recommendations to Congress. We call upon the Commission to come to New York to make thorough and complete investigation of the camps and their impact. Justice delayed is justice denied.