



ORAL TESTIMONY
COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS
Chicago Hearing, September 22 and 23, 1981

My name is Toyo Suyemoto Kawakami, from Columbus, Ohio, where I am the Head Librarian of the Social Work Library and Assistant Head of the Education/Psychology Library of the Ohio State University and hold the faculty rank of Associate Professor. I am a California Nisei (second generation), now sixty-five years old, perhaps better known by my maiden name, because I have been a writer of poetry, essays, and articles from the 1930's to the present.

At the time of our evacuation in April of 1942, I was living with my infant son at my parents' home in Berkeley, after my husband, Iwao Kawakami, had left us in December of 1941. A brother, Roy, was already in the Army, but, besides father and mother, there were still three sisters and four brothers at home. They were attending school from the junior high to the university level.

Our family had little time to prepare for the actual move out of Berkeley. My brother William, then a graduate assistant, teaching bacteriology at the University of California, learned from an acquaintance at school that departure dates had been posted and that larger families were listed as having to leave early. So he called home that midafternoon to tell us that we must be ready to depart the very next morning at seven a.m., and it was then I realized the finality of the evacuation order.

The following morning, with the pieces of luggage that we could manage to carry ourselves and several rolls of bedding, we walked out of our rented home and left everything else behind furniture, household equipment and wares, tools, clothing. To this day I have no idea of the monetary value of all that we had to abandon. Because my son had a cold, I had asked for an extension to allow him to recover and I was bluntly informed that only my infant son could remain at the house for another day or so. To

stay in an empty house with just the baby was unthinkable, and fearing total separation, I decided that we should remain together under the family's identification number, 13423. So it was that we were among the first families to be evacuated from Berkeley.

Our destination was the Tanforan Race Track, in San Bruno, south of San Francisco, turned into an assembly center. There we were assigned to horse-stalls that had been whitewashed for human habitation. The smell, the appearance of the hoof-dented walls, and the draftiness of the floors cannot be forgotten. Soon the dampness and the chill of the air worsened my baby's cold, till he became seriously ill. It was demoralizing to watch a plump, lively infant lose weight rapidly till he looked emaciated, burning with a fever that dried and scaled his face and body, and not have any remedies on hand. From my sister, a medical technologist, I knew that the hospital was not yet completely equipped and that the pharmacy was still awaiting supplies. We had been moved out before the assembly center was even ready to receive the evacuees. Eventually a woman doctor, the first of the medical staff to come into Tanforan, made a house-call, and she recommended tepid baths and as much fluid as the sick baby could drink. There was no medicine available that she could prescribe.

On the day our neighbor learned that her own family doctor, an Issei (first generation), had just arrived, she dashed off to find him, and brought him back with her to our horse-stall. After careful examination, he diagnosed pneumonia and said that the baby needed an oxygen tent, which the hospital did not have. He, however, asked me to take him to the hospital and said that he would do what he could.

Late in the afternoon I carried my limp infant, his lips now tinged blue from lack of sufficient air, from the far corner of the center across the entire length of the race track to the hospital, where a bassinet had been made ready for him. Because of the Issei doctor's intervention with the camp administrators and army officials, my son was accepted as a patient at the San Mateo Hospital, miles away, where he remained for almost two weeks. I was not permitted to go with him or visit him, nor could I make telephone calls to find out how he was. I wrote a letter to the supervisor of the pediatric ward and enclosed self-addressed postal cards and asked for some news of my

son. The nurse on ward duty sent me the first of the postal cards, which I have with me right now, dated May 16, 1942: "Your baby has been quite sick with pneumonia. He has improved and most likely is passing the crisis, but in pneumonia we are never sure. If the baby takes a turn for the worse we will get in touch with you." Reassured and yet disturbed, I waited for more news. The following week the supervisor herself wrote, "Your little boy has been transferred to the children's ward with the other children because he is so much better, but her next card stated that he had had a slight asthmatic attack, though still improving. Soon afterwards he returned to us, but after we were interned at the Central Utah Relocation Center (Topaz), he had another bout with pneumonia when he was a toddler. Throughout his brief life (he died when he was sixteen), he suffered from the allergies and asthma acquired while in the camps. Although he was never near a horse, whenever he was skin-tested for allergy, he showed a four-plus reaction to horse dander. So I am certain that the lack of specialized pediatric care, inadequate nutrition, and the unusual living conditions we endured exacted their toll of my son's health and life.

During my son's illnesses, I tried to maintain composure, continue calmly with the business of teaching, in the Tanforan High School and in the Topaz High School, and interact as usual with the people of the block. But the worry, the frustration, the helplessness I felt under the circumstances affected me physically, so that I developed stomach ulcers and had to cope with prolonged treatment and ulcer diets.

We were at the Tanforan Assembly Center from April through September of 1942. There a number of college graduates grew aware of how aimless and lost the children and teenagers were, after they had been removed from their homes and former schools. So interested college graduates organized a voluntary school, and I taught English to high school students. At the first high school assembly, held outside on the grandstand seats, I witnessed an incredible incident that was moving and eloquent. At the end of that morning program, as the students stood up to return to the open classroom indoors, all of them began to sing "God Bless America." Those young people still believed in the country of their birth. We teachers could only gaze at each other, some of us with tears.

We were sent to Topaz the first week of October, 1942, and we stayed there until

the end of October, 1945. Here I taught English and Latin to high school students, while at the same time I also supervised, and taught in, the Basic English Department of the Adult Education Division.

The registration for loyalty conducted by the Army and the War Relocation Authority for people seventeen years of age and older had great impact on my students, both Issei and Nisei. The loyalty questionnaire unsettled our entire camp. Many young people answered negatively to the questions on loyalty because of their parents. These students were not disloyal in their hearts, as the public believed, but motivated by a desire to stay with their parents. During the segregation program that followed the registration, I lost a number of my students, because they were transferred to Tule Lake.

After a year of teaching in the high school by day and in Basic English by night, the tight schedule became too burdensome, especially with the care of a young child at home. So I became a librarian in the Topaz Public Library, and because of this experience, I decided to become a professional librarian after relocation. As members of my family gradually relocated to Cincinnati, my son and I joined them in that city. He attended the public schools there, and had just finished his junior year in high school when he died, in 1958.

It is for my son's sake that I have just completed writing the first draft of a book dealing with our interment years. The confusion and bewilderment of those early days in Tanforan; the rugged conditions in Topaz, with its sharp contrasts in weather, the dust-storms, the isolation from civilization; the patience and remarkable endurance of the Issei; the adaptability, the hopefulness and faith of the Nisei and Sansei (third generation) - all have fallen into place in my book, which has taken so many years to think through and write. I simply wonder what my son Kay, who would have been forty years old this year, might have been able to tell you today, had he lived. For him, who was a joy and blessing to me:

His shoji opened
To the quiet garden where
Spring is forever.