

BEFORE I BEGIN MY TESTIMONY, I WANT TO SAY REVISIONS HAVE BEEN MADE THEREIN. IN ADDITION -- AS AN ADJUNCT TO MY TESTIMONY -- I AM PRESENTING A VISUAL EXPRESSION OF MY FEELINGS. THE ARTIST IS BYRON GOTO OF HILO, HAWAII, WHO TEACHES AT THE NEW YORK TECHNICAL COLLEGE OF THE REVISED CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Testimony of William Kochiyama at the hearing of
the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment
of Civilians, November 23, 1981, New York, New York

DR. FLEMING AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION :

My name is William Kochiyama. I was born in Washington, D.C. When I was an infant, my father and I moved to New York City where I have resided ever since.

During the Depression I was raised at the Sheltering Arms, an institution for half-orphans. Supported by the Protestant Episcopal Church, it was located in the area known today as West Harlem. Of 120 children, I was the only one of color. Not surprisingly, I grew up believing I was a White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

In the spring of 1940, I traveled to the west coast to enroll at the University of California in Berkeley. Because tuition for non-residents was too high, I had to seek employment.

In my quest for a job, I faced an insurmountable wall of prejudice. Unions would not accept Asians as members and the white collar world was exactly that -- for whites only. For the first time in my life, I felt like a second-class citizen. Everywhere I was advised to find work with my "own people" -- a dismal prospect because I did not know a single word of Japanese nor anything about my cultural heritage.

Desperate, I located a Japanese employment agency which directed me to a large dry cleaning and laundry establishment in Oakland. Owned by an Issei, the firm serviced whites while all the employees were Japanese.

About a week after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the firm was forced to suspend operation. Subsequently, I tried to enlist in the Armed Forces: first with the Army, then the Navy, and finally, the Marines. At each recruiting station, I was thrown out on my ear. No Japs were wanted.

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MAY 6, 1942
JAN 8, 1943

In swift succession an 8 o'clock curfew and a 5-mile travel ban were imposed on all persons of Japanese descent. This was followed by the sweeping Executive Order 9066. My exit door to New York was slammed shut.

On May 6, 1942--four days before my 21st birthday, I entered Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, where most of the Japanese in the San Francisco/Bay Area were incarcerated. At the entrance of the converted race track stood two long lines of troops with rifles and fixed bayonets pointed at the evacuees as they walked between the soldiers to the prison compound. Overwhelmed with bitterness and blind^{with} rage, I screamed every obscenity I knew at the armed guards--daring them to shoot me.

According to Colonel Karl R. Bendetsen, the chief architect of the evacuation scam, the soldiers, the weapons, the barbed wires, and the watch towers were there to protect us. Hogwash!

At Tanforan I lived in a horse stall with two other young men who had no family ties. There we lingered until September 16, 1942. On that day we boarded ancient trains for parts unknown. Several days later we arrived in central Utah. Situated in a **desert**, the stalag-looking camp was named Topaz--an obscene misnomer.

At Topaz I shared a barrack's room with five Nisei bachelors, including two from Hawaii. Sometime later my bunkmates and I signed up for seasonal work leave to pick apples and pears in Provo, Utah. We labored five arduous weeks in the orchards owned by a Mormon family.

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3

On January 7, 1943, I volunteered for the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Next day, I was riding a freedom train to New York.

In New York I was reunited with my father after 2½ years of separation. He told me that soon after the outbreak of war every Issei in the metropolitan area had been visited and investigated by the F.B.I. I also learned that some ^{of them} permanent resident Japanese were taken into custody by federal agents and police and whisked off to Ellis Island. A number of them were subsequently sent to Justice Department Internment Camps located in isolated parts of the United States. To this day, few of these victims will speak of their experiences of wartime captivity.

Although most New Yorkers of Japanese ancestry did not suffer overt prejudice during the war years, the city and its surrounding regions were not spared the cancer of racism. For example: New York City's liberal Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia, and New Jersey's Governor Walter E. Edge, strongly opposed the resettlement of Japanese evacuees on the eastern seaboard--be they American citizens or not. In fashionable Brooklyn Heights, neighborhood residents vehemently protested the establishment of a hostel for Japanese American evacuees. In Great Meadows, New Jersey, evacuee farm workers were literally run out of town by angry townspeople.

Returning to my personal experiences: from June 16, 1943 to December 30, 1945, I served as a rifleman with Company K, 442nd Infantry Regiment. In France--in one action alone--while we were effecting the rescue of the "Lost Battalion," my company suffered 90 percent casualties. Only 23 men remained unscathed-- and I was among the traumatized survivors. I had not intended to dwell on the exploits of the 442nd. But when I heard John J. McCloy, the former Assistant Secretary of War, allege that if the Battle of Midway had been lost, some of us Nisei in uniform might have pledged our allegiance to the other side, McCloy's supposition tore through me like a dum-dum bullet. For the record, I bitterly resent his assumption ^{and categorically deny} that some of us would become turncoats.

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Finally-- as a pre-World War II Nisei New Yorker, who was imprisoned by my own country solely on the basis of race; and as one of approximately 33,000 men and women of Japanese ancestry who served in the Armed Forces of the United States while our people were held in American concentration camps, I feel I have sufficient and justifiable cause to press you--the members of the Commission--to consider and to recommend to Congress the following demands for redress and reparation:

- (1) To pay \$50,000 in restitution to each former internee, including Aleut civilians and permanent resident aliens of the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands, for gross violation of civil and human rights, as well as for financial and material losses incurred by imprisonment.
- (2) To establish a community trust in areas where there is a large population of Japanese Americans and Aleuts, to help fund programs for their elderly, the sick, the handicapped, etcetera.
- (3) To seek legislative means to reverse the Supreme Court decisions regarding the wartime cases of Korematsu, Hirabayashi, and Yasui, which are still on the books. and--
- (4) To educate the American public about the flagrant injustices perpetrated by the government against United States citizens and permanent residents of Japanese and Aleut ancestry during World War II-- the lesson being that such crimes should never, never be permitted to happen again to any ethnic, racial, religious, and political group in America.

Thank you.

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