

Couple says apologies not enough for internment

By Janet Ghent
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It is difficult for Chizu and Ernest Iiyama, of El Cerrito, to look at the experience of World War II without reliving many bitter moments. Chizu's father, a leader in the Japanese American community in San Francisco and the owner of a Chinatown hotel, was one of the first people to be interned following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The family eventually lost the hotel.

"They picked up people in terms of how prominent you were in the Japanese community, not how much of a threat you were," said Chizu, 63, an early childhood education teacher at Contra Costa College.

"It was more than the financial losses," she said. "We were in concentration camps. We had guards with guns. In our camp, an old man was taking a dog for a walk and somebody shot him because he went too close to the fence."

Her husband, Ernest, 73, had relatives who were killed in the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. His mother lived just over the hill from the atomic blast and witnessed the horror of the survivors who had been evacuated to her town.

The end of the war and the horrors of the atomic bomb are inextricably joined in their minds. But they also felt short-changed by a country that had promised them sanctuary.

"We were Americans," said Chizu. "We were brought up with the idea of American civil rights. It was difficult to put together the concept of fair play with the realities of camp life."

Ernest, who had grown up in



Ernest and Chizu Iiyama, at their home in El Cerrito, were interned in camps during WWII.

By Angela Pancrazio/The Tribune

Oakland, had other concerns. Before the internment, there was massive job discrimination against Japanese Americans. For two years, he worked as a gardener to put himself through the University of California at Berkeley, but he couldn't make enough money and quit school, because there was no promise of jobs after graduation.

He had been a member of the Young Democrats, but found that even progressive organizations were not willing to rally to the defense of Japanese Americans, for fear of weakening the nation's war effort.

Fortunately, Chizu was allowed to leave the internment camp after a year in order to attend UC-Berkeley. Ernest, whom she had met at camp in Topaz, Utah, was released from camp when he decided to enlist in the Army. However, he did not pass the physical and never actually served.

"I had a progressive background and was opposed to the militarism in Japan," said Ernest.

The Iiyamas were married in Chicago in 1943 and were running a small New York City dry cleaning business when victory was declared. The first of their three children had just been born.

Pleased that the war was over, the Iiyamas had ambivalent feelings because of the bombings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima. They also had friends who had fought in the 442nd Infantry, made up entirely of Japanese Americans. Some did not come home, others lost limbs, suffered emotional scars or bore financial losses.

"Now we're fairly well off," said Ernest, a retired computer worker. "But we only went to camp with what we could carry. People lost everything. We didn't get back on our feet until we got back to California (in 1955)."

The Iiyamas have visited Japan three times since the war. Ernest's mother, now 97, has told them many stories about the day after the Hiroshima bombing, when the injured were evacuated to a school in her town.

"She will never forget the smell of burning flesh and the sounds of the cries of people shouting 'Please kill me,'" said Chizu.

"She was pretty bitter, because we had harmed civilians," Ernest added.

The Iiyamas visited the Peace Park in Hiroshima. "It was a terrible experience," said Chizu.

Today the Iiyamas are active in Japanese American organizations as well as in the peace movement, including Educators for Social Responsibility and Bay Area Asians for Nuclear Disarmament.

"In Hiroshima, we noticed everybody is for nuclear disarmament," said Chizu. "I didn't meet anybody who had any other position."

Both are also concerned about bills before the House and Senate, offering \$20,000 in restitution to Japanese Americans who had been in internment camps.

"The amount doesn't cover our losses," said Ernest. "But some payment is needed. An apology alone is not enough."