

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY ALAN NISHIO, PRESIDENT OF THE LITTLE TOKYO
PEOPLE RIGHTS ORGANIZATION TO THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME EVACUATION
AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS. AUGUST 4, 1981

Dear Commissioners,

My name is Alan Nishio. I am a Sansei and was born in Manzanar. I am speaking on behalf of the Little Tokyo Peoples Rights Organization of Los Angeles. Our organization has been actively involved in addressing the needs and interests of residents and workers in Little Tokyo as well as the broader Japanese American community of southern California. Through our work, we have come to understand the critical impact of the concentration camp experience upon Japanese Americans. For this reason, our organization has taken up the issue of redress/reparations. ¶ As a founding member of the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations, our perspective on the issue is clear.

↳ The record shows that military necessity did not exist as a basis for the incarceration of 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry. We now know that the camps were created due to other factors such as racism, economic greed, and war hysteria. We feel that the American judicial system speaks clearly to this matter--- that monetary restitution should be awarded to those who have unjustly suffered from the actions of another. We feel the most appropriate remedy to be recommended by the commission should be direct monetary compensation to all of those incarcerated.

There is also another important dimension of the camp experience which needs to be examined. This is the impact of the camp upon the Japanese American community.

If you were to walk through Los Angeles' Little Tokyo today, you would find little to reflect the former vitality of this community before the war. At one time, Little Tokyo played a central role for all Japanese living in the Los Angeles area.

The Little Tokyo of today is geographically less than 1/4 the original size of the community before 1941. What was once a thriving residential and community center is now dominated by tourist shops and prominent buildings owned by banks and big businesses from Japan. There is little to evidence that prior to the camps, one of every five Japanese in the U.S. resided in Little Tokyo. Such is the mag-

nitude of the impact of the camp upon Little Tokyo.

The historical development of Little Tokyo parallels that of other Nihonmachi or Japantowns. In response to segregation and racial hostility, Japanese established their own communities for mutual support and protection. The largest of these was in Los Angeles. With the steady growth of Japanese residing in Los Angeles until 1940, Little Tokyo became the hub of the economic, social, and cultural life of Japanese in the area. By 1940, this represented a substantial number as one-third of all Japanese in America resided in Los Angeles county.

Individuals from outlying areas would regularly come into Little Tokyo to socialize, shop, go to church, or get medical or legal assistance. A variety of Japanese operated businesses and social and cultural activities catered to the needs of Japanese workers and their families. For most Japanese, all facets of life revolved around the community which kept alive cultural traditions in a hostile land. The evacuation destroyed Little Tokyo.

Much has already been said about the losses and injuries suffered by individuals because of the camps. I'd like to discuss some of the less tangible ones such as the destruction of the sense of cohesion within the Japanese community.

The camps created a situation in which Japanese Americans were forced by the government to reject anything "Japanese" in order to prove their loyalty. That is, we were told to reject our own heritage. In addition, camp policies created divisions amongst people---first generation Japanese were pitted against second generation, citizens against non-citizens (most of whom were barred by law from seeking citizenship), English-speaking against Japanese-speaking, parents against children, and friends against friends---often due to rumors of informers and questions of loyalty.

The damage created by the incarceration upon the Japanese community can not be fully comprehended in its magnitude. The values, culture, family structure, and loyalty of an entire people were challenged.

With the closing of the camps and the resettlement process, further steps were taken by the government to insure the destruction of the

community. Upon leaving the camps, Japanese Americans were asked by the War Relocation Authority to stay away from large groups of Japanese so that they might be "more readily accepted into American social groups." In addition, government programs in job placement and student relocation had already dispersed many Nisei to various parts of the country during the war.

For Japanese Americans considering returning to Los Angeles, the prospects looked bleak. In 1944, Mayor Fletcher Bowron warned that the lives and property of Japanese might be threatened as "we have adjusted our economy to their exclusion."

Thus, Little Tokyo and other Nihonmachi never regained their pre-war vitality. Much of the community had been taken over by other groups during the war years and most Japanese were busy attempting to rebuild their lives and demonstrate their loyalty by "staying away from large groups of Japanese."

The Little Tokyo of today thus reflects the legacy of the camps. -----that of forced dispersal. Even attempts to rebuild Little Tokyo were met by another form of expulsion, that of urban renewal as a part of downtown redevelopment. Through this process, many residents and small businesses in Little Tokyo were evicted in favor of concerns catering to wealthy tourists and big business from Japan.

One might argue that the camps experience benefitted the Nisei as it forced them to disperse and thus to assimilate into the broader society. Many see this as a good and necessary step toward the acceptance of Japanese Americans by the dominant society. The fact remains, however, that the process was indeed a forced one based on the destruction of the Japanese American community, culture, and pride.

Today, we see many Issei and Nisei wanting to return to Little Tokyo. We also see many other Japanese Americans wanting to re-learn a culture and experience that has been denied them. We see many Japanese Americans seeking to develop as a people in recapturing an identity and sense of community that was destroyed. We see a desire to rebuild communities like Little Tokyo.

The Little Tokyo Peoples Rights Organization affirms our right to continue in the development of our community. It is for this reason that we call for the establishment of a community fund estab-

lished by the government. This fund can be used to provide needed affordable housing in Little Tokyo as well as needed services for those who suffered the most from camps---the Issei.

Contrary to popular myth, not all Japanese Americans have made it. There are a significant number who require assistance, especially during this period of cutbacks in basic human services. A community fund will hopefully address this need.

Our organization sees the movement for redress/reparations as a part of a broader motion in which other nationalities are involved in seeking justice--- be it the Alaskan Aleuts who also suffered during World War II or Native Americans seeking to regain their rights. It is more than merely an issue of monetary compensation, it is a fight to regain our pride and dignity as a people.

For more than a generation, our community was largely silent on the question of redress/reparations. With a united voice, we now call upon the government for justice.