

15174230

# FILE COPY

Madame Chairperson; Members of the Commission:

My name is Sally Kirita Tsuneishi. I count it a privilege to appear before you to share my personal experiences as a Japanese American living in Hawaii during World War II. I am presently enrolled as a student at California State University Los Angeles, completing my education that was interrupted by the war.

The idyllic life of the Japanese people in Hawaii was shattered with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Hawaii had a very large population of Japanese laborers in the pineapple and sugar fields. My father, an immigrant from Kumamoto Japan, settled in Kohala as a storekeeper at the turn of the century. As a scholarly gentleman, he became the President of the Japanese community and Language school, the town's news reporter for the Hawaii Hochi, letter writer for the many illiterate laborers, and the official match maker—a baishakunin. On Dec. 7, stunned by the news of the bombing he believed to be an air raid practise. But that night, he was arrested by an FBI agent, with our town sheriff apologizing for the middle-of-the-night intrusion. That scene was repeated in homes of many Japanese leaders in Hawaii.

With Father's internment, Mother was left with seven young children without any means of support. Because of the dark cloud of suspicion hovering over our heads, the people did not patronize our store. For months we lived on the generosity of a few neighbors and the produce of our victory garden. Mother knew little of father's business and had a difficult time collecting debts incurred by the people.

We lived in perpetual fear, for our community had many Filipino laborers and the war between Japan and the Philipines was especially bitter. Going to school and facing the taunts of schoolmates about our family disloyalty was one of the unhappiest moments of my life.

Since my oldest sister was attending Cannon Business College in Honolulu, at the age of sixteen, I assumed the role of "head of the

household" for mother could not speak English. I was responsible for any business transaction for our family. With that burden on me, my personal dream of college and career was gone.

Isolated on a small sugar plantation, the only news of the outside world were the persistent rumors that seemed to float in. Thus we learned of the mass evacuation of the Japanese on the West Coast to some inland desert camps. In November, almost a year after Pearl Harbor, we were told to prepare for evacuation. In panic, we packed our personal belongings and few household items. We left behind all the store goods, large household items, car, father's journal of his family that he had traced to the 1500s and his treasured stamp collection. The long hours that my father had spent on these priceless possessions can never be recovered. It was part of his life...lost forever.

Almost forty years have passed, but I can never forget the day when the army trucks rolled in front of my home. Because we were singled out from the large Japanese community, we were filled with an unspeakable shame. We were no longer a part of that community. We became outcasts of society. Our family's good name was smeared with innuendoes, while happy childhood memories were obliterated by the Executive Order 9066. With down cast eyes, we got on the trucks. I remembered thinking-"I didn't do anything wrong." As the trucks passed my high school, I had goose bumps when I saw the American flag flapping furiously in the wind. I thought of my prizewinning essay that I had written for my English class titled: "Why I Am Proud To Be An American." As tears streamed down my face, an awful realization slowly dawned on me-I am an American with the face of the enemy. The added trauma of being uprooted from my friends and home left me confused and with a deep sense of loss.

All the Big Island evacuees were taken to Hilo and later to Honolulu on a cattle ship-steerage class. In Honolulu, we joined hundreds of evacuees from other Islands at the Immigration Station. It was completely surrounded by high barbed wire fences. We were given numbers for personal and family identification, our human dignity had been stripped away. We

were faceless individuals with numbers. On Christmas Eve, we boarded a ship to take us to the Mainland. On Christmas Day, the young people gathered on the main deck to sing Christmas Carols. For that brief moment, our uncertain future and undisclosed destination were put aside.

We arrived in San Francisco on Jan. 1, 1943. We were quickly transferred from the ship to a long train with its windows blackened and bolted. The long nightmarish journey continued and our fears were heightened.

After five long days on the train, we arrived at Jerome Arkansas. As Hawaiians transplanted from our tropical homes, the bitter cold winter of Arkansas was devastating. We were issued a sweater, cap and mittens from the American Red Cross and we wore them day and night. We had two rooms in a barrack and used our crates of belongings for furniture. The large pot-bellied stove was kept burning day and night to provide heat.

For the Japanese, the traditional family structure had always been the focal point of our lives. Because of the absence of fathers and the inability of mothers to cope with the crisis brought on by rebellious and emerging teens, the fabric of this structure collapsed. Freed from usual household responsibilities, many young people became undisciplined and caused much grief to their families. Camp life had destroyed the family pattern, father did not have his place of honor as the bread winner of the family.

After many months of living in a camp, I began to question my loyalty to America. It was the 442nd Battalion presence in Camp Shelby and their frequent visits to our camp that helped me to regain my sense of patriotism to my country.

Father was still detained in Camp Livingston in Louisiana. As the eldest in the family, I was granted permission to go and visit him. I was shocked to see stooped shouldered, aged beyond his years as he came shuffling slowly toward me with the help of a cane. He had become a tuberculin, having cared long hours for the other internee patients. With his little background of medicine, he had cared for the sick, who otherwise might have been neglected. It was a painful reunion for father and daughter.

4

After two and a half years, he was allowed to join us at Arkansas camp. He was broken in health and in spirit. To see him return to us so changed was the single most painful experience that I bear of the evacuation.

After the war, we were allowed to return to Hawaii. But there was no homecoming for us. In fact, there was no home. The plantation had completely taken over our home and store. After a week of visiting with former neighbors, we went to Honolulu to seek a new life—a new beginning. The only place that we could afford was under a house. Not a basement, but a sheltered space under a house. I went to work as a nurse's aid and my father found a job at a pineapple cannery as a night janitor. I remembered how my father apologized to us for bringing us to such a "home." It was an unforgettable experience for our family.

I've given up my own ambition and helped support my family. My younger sister finished attending the Beauty school and we helped our brother through college. He later served our country as an Air Force officer and died in service to his country.

The evacuation experiences had disrupted our lives. Father never regained his former status in society. We all lost the precious memories of our childhood and the sense of belonging to a hometown. These invisible scars run deep in our souls. The loss of human potential can never be measured, nor through any sum of money be restored. This is the greatest tragedy that resulted from the unjust evacuation of the hundreds of innocent victims of the war.