



National Council for Japanese American Redress

925 West Diversey Parkway, Chicago, Illinois 60614

July 26, 1981

Dear Friends,

The New York Times article in our last letter was added at the very last minute, just as the rest of the letter was being printed. There was not time for comment. It served as prelude to the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians hearings in Washington, DC. It set the stage and identified NCJAR as a principal. Our role was reinforced by an NYT story on the following Sunday which leads this letter.

I first learned of David Oyama's op-ed (opposite editorial) article from a telephone interview with radio station WPLR in New Haven, Connecticut on Thursday, July 9th. I was at work. This is significant because few people know my number there -- one of the few being the staff at CWRIC. They are the most probable link, thereby suggesting their interest in co-operating with us. At the hearings, there were several concrete demonstrations of cordiality and co-operation.

The next day I received a call from Susan Peterson of NBC News. She was interested in doing a segment for the NBC Evening News. Later, I received a call from the CBS Morning with Kuralt program. It's heady stuff. It demonstrates the immense influence of the NYT. It promised a far different Washington for the Japanese-American community, one not dominated by the JACL.

Yuriko and I drove in a rented, air-conditioned Toyota. I wasn't sure my 8-year old Datsun would make it. And I wanted to arrive in presentable condition for our first destination, the Capitol, for our NBC interview. At one point in our long journey, we opened a soggy fortune cookie which reassured us with, "You are headed in the right direction."

The hearings of the first day, Tuesday, July 14th, were impressive. They were held in the Senate Caucus Room which is famous and large. The Commissioners sat at a long table. Off to the left were a battery of cameras from network and local TV. Their lights created a theatrical effect. All the Commissioners were present except Arthur Flemming and Robert Drinan. Flemming was there for the second day's hearings; Drinan remained absent. I missed the opening remarks by the Commissioners because of the morning traffic (we stayed in Springfield, VA where the motel rates are cheaper) and because we watched the Morning show until our segment appeared at the very end. I arrived, after parking the car, when the parade of congressional witnesses, who seemed attracted like moths to those lights, began. They didn't say much worth remembering, except for Representative Akaka of Hawaii who proposed a remedy of scholarships for the children of internees: one year for each year of internment.



Who Pays When Democracy Falls?

Details of World War II lose clarity as history fades and revisionist interpretations abound. But victims have a habit of remembering and last week, nearly 40 years after the internment of 110,000 Japanese-Americans in Government relocation centers, a Federal commission began hearings in Washington to establish why internment was ordered and to decide whether compensation was due its survivors and their descendants.

The relocation of West Coast Japanese-Americans to 10 centers, controlled by armed military personnel, was approved by President Roosevelt in 1942 and upheld by the United States Supreme Court in two separate decisions, in 1943 and 1944. Testifying before the commission, William Hohri, chairman of the National Council for Japanese-American Redress, called the centers "concentration camps" and said their survivors wanted reparations "for the deprivation of our civil and constitutional rights" and other grievances. His organization, he said, would sue the Government for compensation, no matter what the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians recommends.

Former Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas was from 1942 to 1946 an Under Secretary in the Interior Department, which ran the centers. He testified that the internments were a "tragic error" in which "racial prejudice was a basic ingredient."

Although he agreed that the mass internment "was a tragic failure of American democracy," Senator Henry M. Jackson, Democrat of Washington, said he opposed monetary compensation. The panel's most important work, he said, should be drafting a code of conduct for other potential wartime situations. The hearings will continue next month in California and subsequently in Seattle, Alaska and Chicago.

Eva Hoffman
and Margot Slade

who led his people from their homes into the desolation of the camps. (But actually he never went to camp.) And then he said the Commissioners would uncover hostility towards him, but that he was hardened to it. His enemies, he described, had made effigies of him and smeared them with feces. (I'd never heard of this level of personal hostility; most of what I've encountered was more diffuse and directed at JACL policies and at individuals who acted as informants.)

Finally, the three community organizations presented their statements. We led off. NCRR (National Coalition for Redress/Reparations) followed. The JACL completed the panel. I read my statement and finished in exactly the 15 minutes allotted. We were asked by Joan Bernstein to summarize. But it has been my tactic to make identical the written and spoken arguments on the assumption that few would bother to read a long statement and that a good speech can be written. A summary would have weakened the presentation. NCRR was represented by Bert Nakano and by Sasha Hohri, whose father I am known as. Bert ran out of time and had a tough time trying to fit a conclusion in right on the spot. Sasha almost didn't get a chance to speak. But she persisted and prevailed. She spoke on behalf of Concerned Japanese Americans (CJA) of New York. CJA is part of NCRR in coalition.

The JACL completed the panel with their typical practice of introducing their visiting dignitaries and local leaders. The national president did this and then deferred to Min Yasui who made a ringing statement. But as he was speaking, it became difficult to know for whom he was speaking because of his repeated references to his own plight in those dark days. In the questions period, he did seem to make a good case for legal restitution.

We received considerable attention from the Commissioners. Bill Marutani asked if we would share our research with the Commission. "Yes," I replied. Justice Goldberg assured me that I needn't feel bad about my criticizing the Commission. I said quickly, "I didn't." He went on to explain that he, too, had had initial misgivings about the CWRIC when asked to serve on it. Sen. Mitchell asked if we would share information on the progress of our lawsuit. I agreed. Then Justice Goldberg asked if we would submit a proposal for enabling legislation to the Commission. I said, "Yes." I believe our testimony was successful because we had presented specific proposals for all to hear.

We were to be followed by the Aleuts. But they were unable to be present. So Father Gromoff, a Commissioner, read two statements.

Four attorneys groups followed to make the final presentation before the lunch break. They did a good job of presenting the legal case for redress. In the questions period, they parried a revealing question from Bill Marutani, which asked, in effect, "If we were assured that this kind of thing could not recur, would we back down from pressing for redress?" One of the attorneys, Dennis Hayashi of BAAR, I believe, responded by saying that that question was really for the national organizations to answer, not attorneys. (I would have told Marutani that NCJAR is simply seeking our day in court, not to effect deterrence.)

The lunch break was about an hour late. On both days, we found ourselves getting lost in the tunnel system of the Senate buildings which lead to the cafeteria. There are numerous signs in the upper floors, but not a one in the basement. But like rats, hungry rats, in a maze, we found our way to food.

The next set of witnesses were active in government during the internment period: James Rowe (Justice), Leland Barrows (WRA), and Abe Fortas (Interior). In their own fashion, each defended their acts. Barrows got the biggest laugh when he came to the defense of the WRA wage scale. He made serious misrepresentations when he blamed the reluctance of the internees to leave camp on institutionalization and blamed the Army for the segregation program. He failed to mention that each relocatee was given \$25 and a one-way ticket. And it was the WRA which initiated the segregation program.

Fortas was eloquent but too forgiving. He admitted that had he been on the Supreme Court at the time, he couldn't be sure what he would have done. But he is ill-informed. For example, he seemed to assume that the hysteria of 1941-42 persisted into 1944 when the key judicial decisions were rendered.

None of these former officials added new information. In fact, they tended to distort well-established facts. They were still defending the government. It was not encouraging.

Former officials were followed by current officials, mainly historians representing Justice, Army, and State departments. Their brief histories relied exclusively on secondary sources (already published works). While not particularly enlightening, they were more candid. I noted that Dr. Trask of the State Dept. made the distinction between "our people" held in Japanese hands and the internees. Some people are more people than others. In his references to the role of the Spanish consulate, he seemed to be treating all internees as citizens of Japan. Japanese citizens did have the recourse of appealing to their government through Spain. American citizens, however, had no such recourse.

The Commissioners seemed to be incapable of raising the pertinent questions. There were not given access to key staff persons during the testimonies who could counsel them on points to be raised.

Gordon Hirabayashi, a spokesman for Mark Clark, and Min Yasui were the final testifiers on Tuesday. Thanks to the illustrious members of Congress, the hearings had run way over their allotted time. Gordon and Min were defendants in Supreme Court cases. Mark Clark was the military commander of the 442nd. Gordon was unable to finish his statement. Min made his short and sweet. The Clark statement was read from beginning to end.

Wednesday, the next day, was open. I understand that CWRIC could not "book" the Senate Caucus Room for Wednesday. I spent several hours, the sleepless ones, attempting to re-write our testimony to rebut Tuesday's testimony. But in the light of day, I decided to leave rebuttal to others. (It never came.) In the afternoon, our law firm met with journalists to discuss the status of the preparations for our lawsuit. The firm also met with representatives from two of the law groups, BAAR (Bay Area Attorneys for Redress) and ALDEF (Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund). I felt both meetings were fruitful and enlightening, to me as well as to the participants.

On Thursday morning, it took all of the two hours we had allotted to drive to the Russell Senate Office Building. So we again missed breakfast. Again, too, there were congressional speeches. Then Mike Masaoka talked for 30 minutes and had to be cut off. He said that his cardiologist would not permit his writing a statement so he spoke extemporaneously. I don't remember much of his statement, except that at the end he identified himself as "Moses Masaoka"

The afternoon session began with the dramatic highlight. Ms Lillian Baker, with brightly blond bouffant hair, white, was wearing a white pants suit and sat alone at the witness table, waiting patiently for the hearings to reconvene. Ms Baker seems to have found a second career in conducting a one-woman campaign against the application of the term "concentration camps" to her all-American relocation centers. In the final determination, she believes, her efforts will make America come out "smelling like a rose." Her arguments were of two types: ad hominem and misinterpreted facts. She implied that she had received support from President Reagan and from Dillon Myer. This support was supposed to lend weight to her arguments. Then, as she presented her facts, she was interrupted by Justice Goldberg who pointed out her misinterpretations. She attempted to argue that because a majority opinion of the Supreme Court included statements about the use of "concentration camps" that this became a majority decision of the Court, which it obviously was not since it was not at issue. Goldberg was obviously enjoying himself, as was the audience. But Ms Baker was not to be cowed. She ran out of time. She fought for some more. Ran out again. Then got a final minute and left very angry. She made it immensely difficult for any Commissioner to take her position seriously. She thereby performed a great service for the cause of redress. And out in California, where she's from, she does more of the same by getting people really angry.

Louis Schneider and Don Nakawatase of the AFSC (Quakers) and Jack Greenberg of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund followed. Both organizations were strong advocates of redress. AFSC recently voted, as a national body, to support J-A redress. Greenberg pointed out significant parallels between discrimination against J-As and blacks. Their statements were by far the best of any of the major civil rights organizations to date.

The hearings concluded with a panel of individuals from the East Coast, except for Dwight Chuman, English editor of the Rafu Shimpo newspaper in L.A. Their presentations had punch. Dwight, especially, did the J-A community the much-needed service of bringing the issue of JACL wartime collaboration with the government into the hearings. He also publicized the results of the Rafu Shimpo's poll on redress, which is certainly the largest taken to date. The survey indicated close to 90% support for monetary redress, 3350 from a total of 3749 respondents.

All in all, I would have to say that the Commission is off to a good start. Towards the end of the hearings, all of the Commissioners were using the term "reparations" quite naturally and expectantly, except for Lundgren. But it still remains to be seen how effective they can be. There are serious problems with the staff and with the pervasive influence of Reagan Republicanism. Cheryl Yamamoto resigned right after the hearings. She was a key person. The congressional witnesses were uniformly pessimistic about any significant appropriation. It may wind up being a good show. JACL friends were talking about catharsis.

Our lawsuit still remains the single ray of hope. We still need your monetary support. If you haven't made a contribution, do it now. If you already have, consider doing it again. And get your friends and relations to join in.

Peace,

William Hohri

William Hohri

Comment

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