

July 30, 1981

TO: THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

SUBJECT: PERSONAL TESTIMONY OF ROBERT S. SATO, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

IDENTIFICATION:

I am Robert S. Sato, Professional Civil Engineer, licensed in the State of Washington, residing at [REDACTED], Seattle, Washington, 98112.

On December 7, 1941 I lived on my parents' farm in Sumner, Washington with my parents, three sisters and two brothers. In May, 1942 our family was placed in a concentration camp first in Area B at the Puyallup Fair Grounds Assembly Center, then in Block 19, Minidoka Relocation Camp, Idaho. In July, 1943 I graduated from Hunt High School, Minidoka, as a member of the first senior class. In May, 1944 I entered the U.S. Army from the Minidoka Camp. My parents and younger sister and brother were still confined. My older brother had already volunteered for the 442nd RCT. From October, 1944 until discharge in July, 1946, I served with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team in France and Italy.

PURPOSE OF TESTIMONY:

The U.S. Government condoned an open atmosphere of racial prejudice against legal residents and citizens of Japanese ancestry, and in 1942 imprisoned all persons of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast, thus opening a shameful chapter in the history of

the United States. The testimony I am submitting is intended to help the Commission understand a small segment of how EVACUATION affected me and my family and to understand the need to develop a just and honorable resolution to this dark but open chapter in our nation's history.

FAMILY EXPERIENCES:

The war with Japan in the early stages was going badly for the U.S. Military, leading to much fear that the West Coast would be invaded by Japanese Forces. Radio and newspapers daily reported many acts of espionage and sabotage, with strong inferences that such acts were being committed by persons in the local Japanese communities. These reports, though never substantiated, subjected us to tremendous stress due to the "brain washing" tactics of the news media that continually questioned our loyalty. The subsequent order to evacuate was followed by bargain hunters looking for "good deals." With no firm date when we in the Sumner area would be evacuated, my parents went about their normal tasks of planting the spring crops. I would estimate our farm crops, vehicles, machinery, improvements, tools and supplies were worth conservatively \$45,000 at 1942 price level. With the help of my eldest sister, my parents managed to sell the farm for a figure I suspect was about \$5,000 although at one point my father, in utter frustration and anger, was about to abandon rather than to give away his farm at such a ridiculously low price. From a financial standpoint, the actual loss was much greater than my estimate of \$40,000 at 1942 prices because prospective profits from farm operation were improving as the country was emerging from the depths of the great depression.

Evacuation meant the sudden loss of my folks' hopes for financial security into their retirement years, loss of their dream of owning their own farm and loss of their ability and pleasure of helping us, their children, through higher education and establishing our own homes. Evacuation cut off those aspirations and replaced them with untold hours of worry and anguish as they and we faced the unknown. Would the Isseis be separated from their citizen children? Were we to be rounded up and all be killed? How long would we be imprisoned? Would we be allowed back to our homes or would all of us, even "American" children, be sent to Japan?

In all the turmoil and anxiety of those days we suffered a hurt much deeper than we realized. The financial losses and superficial hurts from bigoted acts were overshadowed by a long lasting hurt that many of us carried without comprehending what made us feel the way we did; I know I didn't understand. Let me explain.

We had been brought up learning and believing in the highest ideals of democracy; "America was the melting pot of the world," ---- everyone had an equal chance! At the same time, our parents had taught us to carry ourselves with dignity, maintain our self respect; bring credit not shame to oneself, parents, family and community. With this background how hurt we were by the daily barrage of accusation regarding our loyalty to the United States, our country. The evacuation order hit me with a curious feeling of DISAPPOINTMENT, ANGER AND SHAME.

"DISAPPOINTMENT," I could understand. My country that I loved had fallen short of the ideals of democracy she stood for. I was disappointed in my country.

"ANGER," I could understand. My country had betrayed me by violating a trust of decency and fair play that I expected from her. I was angry because I was unfairly judged and placed behind barbed wires.

"SHAME," I could not understand. Why should I feel ashamed when my family and I were the victims of a terrible injustice. The Nation, the people, should feel ashamed, not I! Yet I felt ashamed. Why? I kept putting this uncomfortable question away for nearly 40 years but finally about two years ago, I understood. I carried the feeling of shame because the Government in issuing E.O. 9066 had said in effect, I'm not a first class citizen. Because of my ethnic background, I was not "equal." What a terrible blow!

Today I would shout I'm a first class citizen, the same as everyone! By the blood we spilled on the battle fields, by the achievements my sisters, brothers and I have demonstrated in our individual endeavors, by the record of good citizenship we earned, but mainly by the ideals of democracy, I am, we are, first class citizens. We deserve and demand to be treated as equals.

MY OBSERVATION:

Some members of the Japanese Community have expressed a wish to forget the humiliating experience of the 1942 evacuation. They too probably remember the "shame" I felt but lacking full comprehension for that feeling, would rather keep it hidden. I believe we need to clear the air! For the honor and betterment of the Nation, we need to reaffirm the ideals of democracy and the rights and obligations we all enjoy as first class citizens.

CONCLUSION:

The mass evacuation and imprisonment of all persons of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast was a terrible mistake. The cloud of disloyalty was swept away by each family, no less than by their sons who served with distinction in military intelligence in the South Pacific as well as on the bloody fields of France and Italy. Yet, to this day, the taint has never officially been removed by even an apology. The mistake remains an open chapter in the history book of the nation. Somehow this shameful chapter must be brought to a close.

This Commission, with the cooperation of the Japanese Community, can bring this shameful chapter to an honorable close. This would require "Redress" and an accurate accounting of the Evacuation Story in all the history books used in our schools. "Redress" would require a reasonable but token payment together with an apology. The Japanese Community must determine whether this payment amount and apology are acceptable, then if so, help close the book. My specific recommendations are:

1. For each year or fraction of year of imprisonment, a token payment of \$25,000 should be paid to each person who was imprisoned. In those cases where such persons are deceased, payment should be made to the legal heirs.

2. A letter of apology signed by the President of the United States should be sent each person or legal heir who experienced the humiliation and insult of evacuation and imprisonment.

3. The President of the United States should conduct a symbolic presentation of payment and expression of apology on behalf of the

nation to a representative group of leaders chosen from the Japanese Community.

4. Action on items 1,2 and 3 should be completed in two (2) years. All history books used in the classrooms of our schools should include the EVACUATION STORY.

I hope this Commission will accept my recommendations so that a dark chapter in our nation's history can be brought to an early close. An apology without reasonable token compensation makes a mockery of justice and the honor of this nation would be tarnished forever.

*Robert S. Sato*  
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