

U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation
and Internment of Civilians

Seattle Hearing

September 9, 1981

Testimony of Haru Isaki

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Commission:

My name is Haru Isaki and I reside in Oakland, California. I wish to describe some of my experiences during the World War II relocation and internment, as well as to urge reparation payments to individuals by the United States Government.

I'm an American citizen having been born and raised in San Francisco.

On December 7, 1941, I was very pre-occupied with all the normal thoughts of a young woman engaged to be married. However, the events of that day shattered that normalcy and began a time filled with fear, hardship, humiliation and a terrible anxiety over an uncertain future. Here are some things I shall never forget.

On the evening of December 7, 1941, our car was singled-out and stopped at the toll plaza of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. Two guards searched the passengers and the car.

On the evening of December 10, 1941, two FBI agents came and searched our house and our dry cleaning shop downstairs -- they even had me open the cash register. So after 41 productive years in this country, Father was taken into custody as a dangerous enemy alien. We were not to see him again for two years.

After the evacuation was ordered, we had only a few days to dispose of property and belongings which were sold for next to nothing. My

husband and I were married on May 4, 1941 two days before our families were evacuated to Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno. It was a horrible way to begin our life together.

Tanforan was not ready nor fit for human occupancy. People were forced to live in horse stalls with manure still on the floors. Men and women had to use the same communal outhouses that had no doors or partitions. We had to fill bags with straw for beds. We stood in line with a tin cup and plate to be fed. I can still vividly recall my 85 year old grandmother bravely standing in line with her tin cup and plate.

On September 25, 1942, we were herded on to a train like livestock for the two day trip to the Topaz Relocation Center in Utah. In the middle of the vast Nevada desert, the train stopped and we were ordered to get out and stretch our legs, but warned not to try and escape. Escape to where? When we debarked, guards were lined up with guns at the ready. This was madness!!

Topaz was located on a barren desert. Actually it was a dry lake bed. Dust storms were a daily occurrence during the summer months when the temperature soared to over 100 degrees. Dust became a "second skin" in the summer as it covered everything and everyone no matter what we did to try and remove it. Temperatures crashed to 30 degrees below zero in the winter when snow, ice and slush replaced the dust. Being from the San Francisco area, we were not accustomed to such extreme heat and cold. The barracks buildings, each of which contained five partitioned living spaces, were of simple wood frame and tar paper construction. They were no match for the harsh extremes of weather in Topaz so we were always either too hot or too cold.

We were furnished with beds, a pot belly stove, but no table or chairs. There were no private washing, bathing, or toilet facilities in the barracks. Each block had a central building for these communal facilities, as well as a mess hall where we took our meals. Since there was no running water in the barracks, we had to

walk some distance to fetch water in buckets for our personal needs every day. Obtaining coal for our stoves in the winter was done in much the same way only it was even more physically taxing and demeaning than fetching water. Our physical surroundings in camp -- the climate and living accommodations -- were as harsh as the Topaz desert, itself.

The terrible emotional drain of camp life was responsible for more permanent damage than the harsh physical surroundings. Humiliation, anger, frustration, degradation, guilt, boredom, isolation, fear, anxiety and uncertainty were my constant companions. It was as though time was frozen and me with it. I had no future. We had no future.


In human terms the price we paid in camp was too high no matter what purposes are alleged to have been served. I lost a baby due to a miscarriage in the harsh winter of 1942-3. We had a son in 1944. He was born on D-Day, June 6th. Life in camp was full of ironies like this -- almost as though we were being taunted.

In closing, I believe that the United States Government must do three things:

1. The record must be set straight. The complete and historically accurate story of the World War II treatment of U.S. citizens and residents of Japanese ancestry must be told to the American people.
2. This dreadful wrong must be acknowledged.
3. Monetary compensation to internees and their survivors must be made as reparation to individuals for the human suffering they were wrongfully made to endure. Payments must result in a sufficiently large amount of money to serve as a discouragement so that this terrible thing never happens again.

Payment to living internees, or to their survivors, should be based upon the amount of time they spent in government custody.

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