

August 13, 1981

Community Committee on Redress/Reparations  
318 Sixth Avenue South #108  
Seattle, Washington 98104

TESTIMONY TO THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND  
INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

My name is Robert T. Mizukami. I reside at [REDACTED]  
East in Fife, Washington 98424. I am 58 years old and my  
present occupation is a wholesale florist-grower.

Prior to the evacuation in 1942, I lived at the address just  
given. My family operated a greenhouse and small farming  
business. I was 18 years old at the time and a recent graduate  
of Fife High School. Along with my parents, two brothers and  
youngest sister, who was 12 years old, we managed to scratch  
out a living in those difficult days of recovery from the  
depression years.

We lived in a community with little prejudicial strife for it  
was a community of people from numerous ethnic origins and like  
ourselves, many made their living from the land.

Executive Order 9066 hit the community with tremendous impact.  
There were several Japanese families living there. Public  
signs were posted, giving instructions for registration and  
preparation for evacuation. They were placed in windows of  
local merchants and on public facility doors and walls. Shock,  
fear, humiliation, confusion and embarrassment are but a few  
words that can be used to describe the emotional waves that  
swept over us at this announcement. Deep seated fears were  
being expressed throughout the community. If it could happen  
to us...the Japanese, could it happen to them also..the Germans  
and Italians?

We had less than two months to dispose of all property and belongings that we could not physically carry. We closed the door behind us, leaving crops in the ground and the greenhouse business in care of a neighbor who was shortly thereafter drafted. The property was eventually sold....for 1/10th. of its purchased value.

We were temporarily interned for a 5 month period at the fair grounds in Puyallup, Washington. From there, we were shipped by train to a permanent camp in Minadoka, Idaho.

Not having traveled beyond my own back yard, so to speak, I shall never forget the moment when I realized what was really happening to me. Stepping off of the train, I found myself in a dry, barren, dusty desert area that was to be my new home. It was radically different from the lush green valley where I was raised. I missed my friends and familiar surroundings; the bed I slept in, the high school momentos and accomplishments I had on my walls, the aroma from the kitchen that would waft through the house when Mother was cooking dinner, the smell of freshly turned soil in the garden, the cold, wet nose of my dog Brownie, nudging my hand as we explored the river bank together. Would these ever be mine to experience again? What would happen to me and to my family?

I had begun to experience the natural human feelings of rage, fear and helplessness, for I had come to realize that in many quarters, we were hated, as though we were the enemy, by the America we tried so hard to be a part of. The government we trusted, the country we loved, the nation to which we pledged loyalty betrayed us, had turned against us. It had become obvious to me that we were interned because of our race. We were visually different. It was painful to see that our government was not helping us but was in fact acting against us.

Camp life was a dehumanizing, depersonalizing experience. We were told that we were being put away for our own safety, so that we could be protected from the hostile prejudice of Americans caught up in war hysteria. We were told this was a patriotic sacrifice necessary for national security, so we pledged allegiance to our government and our flag and obediently and cooperatively followed orders to be incarcerated.

The camps were surrounded by barbed wire to protect us from the dangerous American public, but the weapons of the armed guards in the sentry towers were pointed in towards us, not outward to the vast open area of wilderness surrounding the camp. The gates were locked...we could not leave. We were assigned to live in one room in a series of barren, poorly insulated barracks; our painful need for personal modesty and privacy was stripped away in public toilets and showers; the individual family units lost in the mass meal settings of the public mess halls. Social, cultural, educational and religious avenues of involvement and expression were severely limited to us. We drew upon our own strengths and abilities to manage our day to day affairs.

My brothers and I, being American citizens, enlisted in the U.S. Army. Due to our heritage, we were not eligible for the draft. We were young, full of energy and wanted to do something of credit to demonstrate that we, Americans of Japanese ancestry, would and could stand and fight for our country when she needed us...after all, she had given to us when we needed her. She gave her land to our immigrant parents, opportunity, freedom (in a new found sense), and choice. We felt it our obligation to return the favor; to defend and uphold all that was dear to us, even though the mighty eagles wings were now tarnished.

From behind the gates of camp we left, waving our goodbyes to our parents and sister. We joined the 442nd. Regimental Combat Team, a unit comprised entirely of Nisei and the most highly

decorated unit in the U.S. Army. We saw action in Europe...  
...I lost one brother there. He valiantly died for his country.

Returning home from the war, I gathered the fragments of the family together again. We settled in the Spokane area. It was there I met my wife to be. We married in 1947 and decided to honeymoon in the northwestern states of the U.S. Our first nights stay was in Bonners Ferry, Idaho, where the lodging clerk showed us a room. She asked if we were Chinese. I of course replied that we were Japanese. Her immediate reply was that we could not stay there, that they only catered to 'whites' and that it was her privilege to rent or deny housing as she saw fit. Unless you have been faced, point blank, with discrimination of this type, it is difficult to describe the emotional scarring that is left by so few words. After just returning from a war where the rights and freedoms of this woman and hundreds of thousands like her was bought with the blood of my brother and many more like him, there was nothing I could say that would change her mind and heal my shattered spirits and broken heart.

It was shortly after that experience that a trip back to Fife revealed that the old family homestead was for sale. We bought it back for twice the amount we originally paid for it and once again we were home....this time to stay.

Our evacuation and internment was a devastating experience, an experience that I will spend the rest of my life trying to get over and fighting to keep from ever happening again. It will never be okay. It has left deep and permanent scars and I fear it could happen again...but before you start to disagree with me, just think back a year or two when the sentiments for Iranians in and of this country had the haunting ring of times past.