

9.11.37

TESTIMONY OF DR. JAMES TSUJIMURA
BEFORE THE
COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of this Commission:

Thank you for the privilege of appearing before you today. My name is James Tsujimura. I am a physician and surgeon in private practice, and also serve as Chief of Section, Department of Ophthalmology, Oregon Health Sciences Center University and Medical School in Portland, Oregon.

My parents, four sisters and I are former detainees of the Portland International Livestock Exposition Hall (called the Portland Assembly Center in 1942). We were later transferred to Minidoka Concentration Camp, Block 32, Barrack 7, Apartment E.

Throughout the west coast hearings of this Commission, you have heard a wide body of testimony regarding the experiences of United States citizens of Japanese ancestry during WWII. Among some of this testimony, you have also heard from those who have dared to tell us that the camps in which we were detained were "relocation centers" from which we were free to leave at any time.

In response to such an absurd notion, I would like to draw your attention to six incidents which clearly belie the suggestion that we were not detained against our wills. These are six separate incidents in which eight individuals of Japanese ancestry were shot and killed by the armed sentries who were supposedly there to protect us.

--On May 12, 1942, a Mr. Kanesaburo Oshima was shot and killed by a sentry at the Fort Sill Internment Camp in Oklahoma.

--On July 27, 1942, Messrs. Toshio Kobata and Hirota Isomura disappeared under mysterious circumstances while being transferred to the Lordsburg Internment Camp in New Mexico. The internees at Lordsburg were informed that these two men were shot and killed by sentries while attempting to escape. For the record, the JACL wishes to submit a copy of a

newsletter from Lordsburg describing this incident, with an accompanying English translation.

I should also like to add that we have a different account of a shooting which might possibly suggest two separate incidents at Lordsburg.

--On December 6, 1942, Messrs. Ito and Kanagawa were shot and killed by armed guards during a riot at Manzanar Concentration Camp in California.

--On April 11, 1943, James Hatsuaki Wakasa was shot and killed at Topaz by an armed sentry named Gerlad B. Philpott. Mr. Wakasa was an elderly Issei who was hard of hearing, and unable to hear the guard's single warning as he reached across the barbed wire fence to retrieve his dog, was shot and killed.

--In the summer of 1943, an un-named victim was shot and killed by an armed sentry at Gila Concentration Camp because ~~he~~ strayed outside the barbed wire.

--On May 24, 1944, James Soichi Okamoto, an internee at Tule Lake, was shot and killed by an armed sentry. Okamoto, who was 30 years old, was a truck driver on a work crew involved in a project outside the camp and had been issued an identity button and pass to permit him to leave the camp as part of the construction crew. Upon returning to the camp on May 24, 1942, Okamoto was confronted by Private Bernard Goe, who had a reputation of harrassing the internees. Okamoto had been making trips back and forth most of the day, and Private Goe, who had just come on sentry duty at the gate, stopped Okamoto's truck and ordered him to step out and demanded to see his pass. Private Goe ordered Okamoto to the back of the truck, but the internee, apprehensive of the order because it would have placed him outside the confines of the camp, refused the order. Private Goe then struck Okamoto on the

shoulder with the butt of his rifle, and from a distance of approximately five feet, shot Okamoto in the stomach.

In the aftermath of this incident, Secretary of the Interior Ickes issued a press release, calling the shooting "completely unwarranted and without provocation on the part of the victim." And as a footnote, you should be informed that on July 6, Private Goe was brought before a Court Martial on the charge of manslaughter but was acquitted of the charge. Instead, he was fined a dollar for the unauthorized use of government property, referring to the bullet which struck and killed James Okamoto.

Unfortunately, there is very little information available regarding any of these incidents, and until there is a full and thorough investigation of the deaths of these eight individuals and of others who were shot while interned but who survived, the work of this Commission will not have been completed.

Mr. Chairman, there is another serious matter which I wish to address at this time. At the Commission hearings in Washington, D.C. in July and at these hearings in Seattle, serious accusations have been made against the Japanese American Citizens League, and more specifically against Mr. Mike Masaoka regarding the JACL's so-called cooperation with the government in the forced removal of Japanese Americans from the west coast, and the incriminating role of the JACL in the formulation of the infamous loyalty oath.

As the National President of the Japanese American Citizens League, I wish to request officially for the record that Mr. Mike Masaoka, on behalf of the JACL and its membership, be allowed to respond to these very serious accusations at the Washington, D.C. hearing scheduled in October, in order that these matters may be put to rest.

It is my belief that the issues of the Evacuation and redress placed before

this Commission are of great importance to this nation and that they transcend indictments of individuals and of organizations. Japanese Americans have waited forty years to express their voice on these issues, and I hope that we can join in a recognition of our unity in seeking a just resolution to a bleak episode in the history of the United States and together will provide for a greater future for all Americans.

Thank you.

SUMMARY TRANSLATION OF THE DEATHS OF MESSRS. KOBATA AND ISOMURA
Taken from the attached newsletter, Lordsburg, New Mexico

On July 27, 1942 at 1:45 a.m., 147 new internees from the Bismark Justice Internment Center in North Dakota arrived near here by train. After disembarking at a nearby field, they walked to the camp.

There were two ailing persons among this new group--Messrs. Kobata and Isomura. Mr. Kobata was a long-time victim of tuberculosis who was being transported from a "sick bed" in Bismark. Due to an accident which caused permanent injury to his back ten years previously, Mr. Isomura had great difficulty walking. Consequently, the guards made separate transportation arrangements for these two men to the camp. Three soldiers had been assigned to guard them.

In the meantime, the 145 other internees started marching to the camp, arriving at approximately 3:00 a.m. Nonetheless, Messrs. Kobata and Isomura had not yet reached the camp. When they still had not arrived by mid-morning, the internees' leaders and concerned friends of the two men inquired about them at the camp clinic. The clinic personnel informed the group that no one had been taken in the night before.

The group then telephoned the military doctor and questioned him about the two men. The doctor replied that they had been taken somewhere else and were being cared for. However, on July 28th, Dr. Oguchi announced that he had been informed by a sargeant that Messrs. Kobata and Isomura had been shot to death while attempting to escape.

In response to the shocking news, an emergency meeting was held by the internees' leaders. It was decided to appeal to the camp headquarters for Drs. Oguchi and Akimoto to perform autopsies. The headquarters immediately refused this request and instead issued an order that a funeral would be held at 4:00 p.m.

The Japanese in the camp were insulted by this "order" and decided not to attend the funeral. Instead, they individually held a silent moment of prayer in their barracks.

Since the deaths of Messrs. Kobata and Isomura were viewed as a serious incident, a military investigator was dispatched to the camp and an informal hearing held on September 2nd. The internees submitted their own report to the investigator at the hearing.

Five internees were sent to the military court as witnesses. They returned on September 11th. The outcome of the court hearing revealed nothing new--it was just a reiteration of what the internees had already suspected.

In November, the internees were able to discover that the guard who shot the men was named Private Poston, but there was no information as to what type of disciplinary action was taken.