

TESTIMONY BY THOMAS Y. KOMETANI

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My name is Thomas Yoshio Kometani from Warren, N. J. I am a chemist for a large research organization. When I first thought about testifying before this commission as a child who experienced incarceration during World War II, I called my mother to get some specific dates and facts. Her immediate reaction was quite disturbing to me. I jotted down some of her comments during our conversation.

- Why do you want to bring all that up again?
- It's over. Forget about it.
- You are going to stir up a lot of bad feelings.
- Besides, it is too painful to talk about.
- Be very careful what you say!

That last statement distressed me the most. Forty years after the fact she was still cautioning me about the negative consequences of being outspoken.

Well, America has changed in many ways in the last forty years. So have I. It's time to speak up!

Being the second of four children born to an Issei father and a Nisei mother, I was an uninhibited, well adjusted youngster who did well in school. We lived in Auburn, Washington where my parents ran a service station. I loved my country and took great pride in being an American. I sincerely pledged allegiance to the flag each school day and saved my pennies to buy war stamps to help my country.

I first learned that I was considered an enemy of my birthplace when I was seven years old. My father told me that we were going to be imprisoned by the U. S. government because of our Japanese

ancestry. I can recall the terrible feeling of betrayal when I learned that all people of Japanese ancestry were being treated the same way. Even at that tender age I recognized it as false imprisonment. My parents cautioned us to remain silent about what was going to happen to us because talking too much can get us in deeper trouble.

In the spring of 1942 we were taken by train to Pinedale Assembly Center near Fresno, California. My father was right about us being prisoners. We were guarded by soldiers with rifles on the train. The camp had a high fence around it with guard towers occupied by soldiers with spot lights and guns. I was convinced that everybody^d on the outside really hated us. As a child I certainly was in no position to protest the imprisonment. I remember feeling something less than human in being subjected to barracks, straw mattresses, mess halls, community toilets and barbed wire. One consolation for the kids was that there were no schools at Pinedale.

In the fall of 1942 we were taken to Tule Lake, California which was to be our permanent camp. Except for the climate Tule Lake was just like the camp we left. However, this camp had schools which were in operation two months before we arrived. I remember there was a lot of confusion and I didn't learn much in third grade.

In the fall of 1943 we were moved to another camp in Heart Mountain, Wyoming because Tule Lake was to become a segregation camp for people wishing to go to Japan after the war. While in Heart Mountain I experienced a disruption in family life when my father went to work on a farm in Illinois. I recall the lonely

and difficult times we went through during the six months of his absence.

In October 1944 my father returned to take the family to Marengo, Illinois. By that time we had ~~all~~ adjusted to camp life and were quite fearful about the hostilities awaiting us in the outside world.

The emotional and psychological damages which I sustained during the most formative years of my life was not apparent until we returned to society. The war^r was far from over and the hostility of some Americans toward the Japanese was quite intimidating. The stigma of being imprisoned as an enemy of my own country was to stay with me for decades to follow.

I felt that I was not an American anymore and that if people had their way they would ship me to Japan. When kids called me "Jap" I was ashamed of my heritage. If only I was white so I can be a good American.

During those years I found that I could get along well if I was passive, quiet and agreeable. I was afraid to be assertive for fear that I would not be accepted. After all, how else was a "foreigner" supposed to act? There was an erosion of my self-confidence. The fact that people treated me like a foreigner only served to reinforce my own doubts about my Americanness. At best I believed I was a second class^{SS} citizen.

Unconsciously, I imposed severe limitations on myself and grew up through my teens and twenties with many inhibitions. Consequently, such behavior for^a a young person starting a career was not conducive for advancement in the competitive work environment.

It has been a life-long struggle to change my behavior from passive to assertive. At age 46 I feel that I have finally overcome the damages I suffered during those crucial years of my childhood.

I submit that the incarceration caused the retardation of my career goals by about 10 years. The bases of my claim include the following:

- Abrogation of seven Articles of the Bill of Rights
- Defamation of Character
- False eviction
- False imprisonment
- Emotional and psychological damages
- Damage to ethnic identity
- Disruption of family life
- Disruption of education

I am seeking restitution for damages which were perpetrated against me by the U. S. government during the spring of 1942 to the fall of 1944. It is my intention to donate my share to a community trust fund dedicated to the task of preserving constitutional rights of all Americans, regardless of race, creed or national origin.

I respectfully remind this commission that you are impowered to help insure that what I experienced in 1942 will not ever happen to another child in this country.