

SUMMARY OF DR. KIYOSHI SONODA'S

TESTIMONY TO

U.S. SENATE GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE
Civil Service, Post Office and General Services

Dr. Kiyoshi Sonoda's statement reflects upon his personal experiences as first, a "volunteer" evacuee and his later detention at the Gila Relocation Center in Arizona. Dr. Sonoda will comment upon the discrimination he experienced as a dentist attempting to establish his practice during the war years.

TESTIMONY OF DR. KIYOSHI SONODA

Presented to

U.S. Senate Governmental Affairs Subcommittee
on
Civil Service, Post Office and General Services
August 16, 1984

Mr. Chairman:

My name is Kiyoshi Sonoda. I am 67 years old and a dentist in Los Angeles. I am also President of the Board of Directors of Little Tokyo Towers, a senior citizens housing project here in Los Angeles, although I come here today to speak primarily of my own personal camp experience.

Following graduation from the University of Southern California, School of Dentistry, I established a Los Angeles practice in September 1940. The war broke out in December 1941 and in February 1942 I volunteered to serve in the United States Army Dental Corps. I was told by the draft board that no Japanese Americans were being accepted because they were "bad for morale." As a result, I was given a deferment.

At about the same time, some Japanese Americans already in military service were discharged, not honorably but "for the convenience of the government." To this day, their status has not been corrected in their military records. I urge the Subcommittee and the Congress to take steps so that these records can be changed to reflect honorable discharges.

While the focus of this Subcommittee is on the wartime relocation of civilians, I must point out that Japanese American members of the U.S. armed forces were relocated too. In early 1942, my younger brother was serving with the U.S. Army's coast artillery, in the San Francisco Bay Area, when he was moved to Fort Leavenworth then later to Fort Riley, Kansas. One day, when President Roosevelt visited Fort Riley, my brother and other Japanese Americans were locked up in a motor pool. Think about it: men serving this country, willing to shed blood and even lose their lives, were viewed as a threat.

But the absurdity does not end there. Even employees of the federal government were relocated. My older brother is a pharmacist who in 1942 was a narcotics agent for the Bureau of Narcotics, which was part of the U. S. Treasury Department. He was asked to turn in his gun, and was moved from the West Coast to Baltimore, Maryland. In order to leave for Baltimore, he had to obtain a travel permit from the Provost Marshal of the Western Defense Command.

My oldest sister had married in 1935 and was living in Hawaii. My mother and father, my other two sisters and their husbands, and I remained in Los Angeles. In March 1942 we were given the choice of relocating immediately under the so-called "voluntary" relocation plan or staying in our homes until the involuntary evacuation of Japanese Americans in our area. Our family chose to leave immediately. We went first to the "free zone" near Fresno, California -- an area which we were led to believe would be untouched by a mandatory relocation. In the free zone we were forced to live in small chicken coops and a feed house. Shortly after our arrival, an 8:00 p.m. curfew was imposed. The chicken coop was to be our home for four months.

I had been in dental practice for only a year and a half and had to store all of the equipment. Without my dental equipment and unsure of how long we would be in any one place, I tried farm labor. But I was not accustomed to the rigors of such labor and so when it looked as if we might be in the area for a while, I set up a small office in Parlier, California. In order to move my equipment to Parlier, I had to pay for what had not yet been fully paid for.

On August 4, 1942, despite earlier assurances that we would be allowed to stay in the free zone, we were relocated a second time, to Gila River, Arizona. Very early in the morning we were gathered to board trains that would take us to that isolated place. The ride was to take about twenty-four hours, in temperatures over 100 degrees. Much of the twenty-four hours was spent sitting on railroad

sidings, waiting for the passage of the freight trains, which had priority over our trains.

When we arrived, our belongings -- now our only worldly possessions -- were unloaded before we were. They had been carelessly dumped between several barracks and left there unprotected. By the time we disembarked, a rainstorm had drenched and ruined much of what we still had left.

I cannot remember being fed anything on the train. I do recall that when I had been at Gila for a short time, I was assisting the physicians in checking in new arrivals. I remember that one trainload of people arrived late at night from the Santa Anita Assembly Center after twenty hours on a train crossing the hot, dusty desert. Their facilities were not completed and there were open trenches all around. The evacuees were hungry when they arrived but were given only an apple and boiled egg to eat.

Military personnel were in charge of transporting us -- armed MP's who were accustomed to dealing only with able-bodied men. They had no understanding of the special needs of the aged, the infirm, the women and the children. There were doctors in the camps but no provisions for medical care were made during transport. If a doctor happened to be one of the evacuees, we were lucky. If a doctor wasn't aboard the train, the consequences could be serious. One day, when I had been at Gila for a while, a train arrived after traveling for over twenty hours in the sweltering heat. Among its passengers was a small infant who, by the time he arrived, was suffering from exposure. I held the child as the physicians administered fluids to the desperately dehydrated child. Suddenly I felt his leg twitch and his body went limp as he died in my arms. I will always vividly recall this incident.

At Gila, I and other dentists were supposed to provide dental care. There was no equipment. We had to make our own dental chairs from whatever wood was available. Some dentists had brought their own instruments and small portable equipment. But

it just was not enough. After several months we finally got four dental chairs. Plus our handmade chairs that still gave us only six chairs for over 20,000 people. The better supplies were not available, we never had gold and had to rely solely on inferior metals. During my entire stay at Gila, only very minimal dental care could be provided.

While I was in camp, my sister in Hawaii learned of an opportunity for a dentist to work in a clinic in the Palama Settlement in the Islands. Why was I more of a security risk in California than in Hawaii, which is several thousand miles closer to Japan? The residency requirement for a Hawaii dental license was three years, but I learned that no matter how long I worked there, my work would not be credited towards receiving a license to practice in Hawaii. For those reasons I decided not to go to Hawaii.

After ten months in Gila, I left the camp to go to a friend's farm in Colorado. In doing so, I made room for another dentist who had been separated from his family because there had been enough dentists already in Gila.

As we were not yet allowed to return to the coast, I took the Colorado Dentist Board Examination in 1943. I, along with another Japanese American dentist, failed the examination. When we inquired about why we failed, the Board informed us that no grades were recorded because grading had been done by ballot. We learned through other sources that no Japanese Americans would be allowed to pass the examination during the war. Having no place to go, my friend was forced to return to the camp. I stayed on in Colorado.

A few months later I saw an advertisement for a dentist at the Children's Fund of Michigan. The job was open until the interviewer learned I was a Japanese American rather than Chinese. He said he would lose their public funding if he hired me. I found out this was not true and that Senator Cozzens, who had made money in Ford Motor Company, started the fund with millions of his own dollars.

Still unable to return to the coast, in October 1943, I finally found a job with the Department of Charities in Detroit, Michigan. I worked in the child-adult clinic, six hours a day for \$75 a week. I was hired with an agreement that I would take the next Michigan Dental Board in June 1944. The USC Dental School did not cooperate in forwarding my credentials to the Michigan Board, and I had to enlist the aid of the War Relocation Authority. Michigan was the only state in which I had been treated fairly, and I was granted my license in June, 1944.

I continued to practice in Detroit until 1946, when I was drafted in the Army. I was a post dentist at the Presidio in Monterey, California. The day of my discharge, September 28, 1948, was the day my father died. He was 60 when he had first entered the camp and lost all his property. When he was released from camp, he was too tired and too old to start all over again. I am certain that the concentration camp was a factor in his heart condition and relatively early death at 66.

Upon my discharge I returned to Los Angeles with my wife and infant daughter, to live with my widowed mother. I opened an office in West Los Angeles, where I still practice, in 1949 -- nine long years after graduating from dental school.

From my own experience and as President of the Little Tokyo Towers Board of Directors, I know all too well the suffering endured by those still living, especially among the elderly. The Little Tokyo Towers has approximately 300 apartment units, with a current waiting list of over 500 people over the age of 62. These people have no place to go. I am convinced that were it not for the extensive property losses suffered by Japanese Americans due to the relocation, the need for housing now would not be so acute.

The Congress must find some way to redress the wrong which was committed in 1942. The losses in property, physical and mental health, and educational and business opportunities cannot be adequately assessed. The outrageous loss of freedom and dignity can never be adequately measured -- the losses are just too great. But

some form of monetary compensation must be granted.

The Congress must approve monetary compensation, irrespective of the current economic difficulties of this country. The Congress must see that the fact of America's concentration camps will not be forgotten by the American people, by requiring that it be taught in schools, and through whatever other means possible. Finally, the Congress must find a way to ensure that the U. S. Constitution will never again be so twisted and abused. If the Congress can accomplish these things, it will have served the principles of this nation well.

Thank you.