

DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

Rajon

Panel Explores Psychological Effects of the Internment

Studies and testimonies reveal that many Issei expressed feelings of hopelessness during the evacuation and internment.

By GLENN SURAVECH

RAFU STAFF WRITER

Paul Chikahisa said he does not remember many details about the actual evacuation order when it came on Feb. 19, 1942.

"I remember a long bus ride up and down hills," said Chikahisa, who was interned with his family at Poston I in Arizona. "I also remember long lines (of people waiting to be admitted into the camp). . . The interviewer asked my mother questions about my hobbies. . . I don't know why."

Chikahisa along with social workers Carolyn Okazaki and Yasuko Sakamoto, were panelists for a seminar entitled "Psychological Effects of the Internment Experience," held last Saturday as part of the "Day of Remembrance" event at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center.

Chikahisa's testimony solidified the notion that the evacuation and internment had a great emotional impact on the entire Japanese American community, unlike those who downplayed the severity of the experience.

"The first year was very hostile," he remembered. "Many were not used to the (desert) weather. We had many cases of diarrhea and typhoid."

Aside from the physical effects, Chikahisa began to develop a low self-esteem and a lack of enthusiasm for everything.

"I had no ambition. . . I didn't want to do anything," he continued. "At first I was enthusiastic about sports (but after a while) I was not putting forth my best effort."

He added that a school teacher in camp observed that because he was small for his age and underweight Chikahisa would not be a good leader.

"At El Centro Elementary and Junior High School. . . I was very outgoing, very Americanized and I was considered a leader" Chikahisa said. "Going to camp however. . . I didn't want to be a leader. . . In my opinion I think the teachers were incompetent."

The school teachers did not realize that the oppression of the camps attributed to low self-esteem and lack of motivation of some internees.

his older brothers and sister, but after about a year in camp many of them left to work or to finish school, thus separating the family.

He added that because of the internment, his family did not entirely reunite until about 25 years later.

According to Sakamoto, who spent many years studying the effects of the internment from an Issei perspective, she found that during the initial evacuation order, Executive Order 9066, and during the internment many expressed the phrase *shikataganai* (cannot be helped) or *gambare* (do your best).

From such phrases, Sakamoto added that many believed that the Issei accepted the internment.

"However, from my experiences (through interviews) they felt that it (internment) was wrong," she said. "These concepts were used as conscious and unconscious tools to cope with racism, hardships, to hide their pain, sustain their dignity and uphold their strength as human beings."

After the war, the Issei tried to reconstruct their lives withholding their feelings and never contemplating on "raising their voices about their experience."

The same sentiment carried over into their own families—never talking about or explaining their experiences with their children.

Before the redress movement began, the Issei mentality, according to Sakamoto, was "I can't understand the younger generation."

In 1980, she explained that sentiment began to slightly change, "Someone has (raised an issue) about what the government did. . . let's go see anyway."

By the mid-1980s, Issei mentality toward the internment changed dramatically, "We can't stay silent while the Sansei who didn't even experience the war are working so hard for us. . . it's a shame that the Issei don't participate also. . . don't you think that time has come to talk about such a mistake?"

Finally, after the passage of redress, Sakamoto said that the Issei sentiment was, "Thank you so much for your efforts. . ."

Okazaki, lastly, addressed the issue of internment from a Sansei and Yonsei perspective.

The on-going message through-

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Chikahisa made it clear that he was not speaking for everyone in camp, but for most, the experience was similar.

Overall, according to Chikahisa, internees had no one to turn to for help. He explained that he relied on

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The on-going message throughout the seminar was the importance for the Issei and Nisei to educate the Sansei and Yonsei about camp experiences.

Okazaki is familiar with only one study about the effects of in-

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MARIO G. REYES/Rafu Shimpō

Panelists discussing the psychological effects to a standing-room-only crowd were, left to right, Paul Chikahisa, Yasuko Sakamoto and Carolyn Okazaki. The workshop was part of the the 50th anniversary of Executive Order 9066.

Psychological Effects

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ternment on the Sansei and Yonsei.

The study, conducted by Donna Nagata, found that there is a high degree of silence about the internment within most Japanese American families.

She added that a large number of Issei and Nisei try to push back the interment experience “so they won’t have to deal with it. Remembering the internment may bring back bad memories and nightmares.”

For years, many internees dealt with the internment in this way until the redress movement began in early ’80s with the Commission on the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians hearings held during the Carter administration.

Okazaki explained that the hearings was the single event that sparked several recovery groups.

The hearings allowed internees to no longer feel ashamed. Furthermore, it allowed them to voice their experiences.

In conclusion, according to Okazaki, the commission hearings acted as the single factor in the community’s internal liberation from internment.

However, there are a great deal of Japanese American families who continue to suppress the internment issue.

Focusing on the future of the community and the recovery of internees, one main method is through education and understanding which lies within the discussion of the issue of Japanese American internment.