

# Hearings a Catharsis for Internees

By JUDITH MICHAELSON, *Times Staff Writer*

He was a mild-mannered middle-aged man, spare, with thinning brown hair and thick-framed glasses, so when he suddenly banged his fist on the table and said he would not be silenced or hurried, it came as something of a shock.

Jim Matsuoka of Monterey Park, student counselor at California State University, Long Beach, was the 100th or so witness at hearings here this past week of the national Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. The commission is charged with investigating the evacuation of 120,000 West Coast Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Because the hearings were already two hours behind schedule, the request from acting Chairman William M. Marutani, a Philadelphia jurist, to speed things along had seemed like standard procedure.

But Matsuoka held his ground. What you're looking at, he told the judge, who also is of Japanese ancestry, is "a product of the camps."

Matsuoka testified he was 7 when he spent the first of three Christmases at the Manzanar internment camp in the Owens Valley.

He told how he got "this old repainted toy as a gift from the out-

side" and that the man who presented it to him was "clearly embarrassed" because the toy was broken. So when the man walked away, "I threw it in the trash can. To me, that toy symbolizes how we as a minority are treated—second-class, all the promises are broken..."

The hearings witnessed an emo-

---

### *Some spoke for dead parents, others for their young children.*

---

tional outpouring from Matsuoka and others of a community that for years lived by, and outwardly seemed to thrive on, the title "Quiet Americans." As former Sen. Hugh B. Mitchell (D-Wash.) allowed at the end, "In some way the Japanese people have broken away from that earlier feeling in regard to words. Now they have the whole nation talking."

For three days they bore witness, some of them speaking out for the first time in their lives. Altogether about 160 people from the Los An-

geles area testified at the State Building auditorium.

Each day the crowd was so large the overflow had to be accommodated in adjoining rooms with loudspeakers. Despite that there was a sense of intimacy, of family. There were representatives of the Issei, the Japanese-born generation, as well as their grandchildren, the Sansei, products of the postwar baby boom, some of whom brought their own children to the hearings.

But mostly the crowd was Nisei, the first generation born here, those who had experienced the camps, and the consequences of internment. Against the backdrop of testimony there was the occasional sound of babies crying, but it was hardly noticed compared to the sudden breaking down of witnesses. In turn, people in the audience wept.

At the start, people in the audience also had a chance to vent their anger, in jeers, as Sen. S. I. Hayakawa sought to justify the evacuation on grounds of military necessity and wartime hysteria, as he termed the description "concentration camps" as "semantic inflation of the worst kind" and said that demands for monetary redress

make "my flesh crawl with shame and embarrassment."

The next day there was further jeering as Lillian Baker of Gardena and her associate, Rachel Kawasaki, who oppose the hearings and use of the words "concentration camp," sought to seize a paper from which James Kawaminami, president of the 100th/442nd Veterans Assn. of Southern California—the famed Nisei troops who served in Italy and southern France—was reading. There were cheers when the wom-

en were forcibly evicted from the room.

Later the same afternoon they cheered once more as former Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, a commission panelist, said the evacuation of Japanese-Americans to 10 internment camps across the West "took place—nobody can dispute this—because Japanese-Americans looked different, their color was different."

And they laughed when, without mentioning Hayakawa by name,

Goldberg referred to how great things must have been in camp because there are still camp high school reunions. "There was a reunion one month ago in Jerusalem," he said, "of survivors of the death camps. Now, would you believe the death camps were a nice summer resort?"

The purpose of the nationwide hearings is to educate the public about what happened 39 years ago in the months after Pearl Harbor.

**Please see HEARINGS, Page 2**



BOB CHAMBERLIN / Los Angeles Times

Testimony was often impassioned at hearings on Japanese-American internment in relocation camps.

## HEARINGS: 'Quiet Americans' Speak Out

### Continued from First Page

They became, as any number of witnesses said, their "healing," their "catharsis"—indeed, their "rite of passage."

Some witnesses said they were speaking for dead parents, others for children who were too young to know. Some compared themselves to rape victims,

"guilty and ashamed" for having had to spend up to three years behind barbed wires and guard towers with the guns pointed inward. Others likened the experience to being "battered children," beaten down by the parent-country but still loving the country because it is the only one they know.

"For over 35 years I have been the stereotyped Japanese-American," said Alice Tanabe Nehira, 38, of Camarillo, who works for Northrop in the international target and missiles division. "I've kept quiet. . . . But no one benefits when truth is silent."

In the stifling hearing room she told of her late father, a native of Hiroshima, who came to this country when he was 16, before World War I. "Even after the bombing of Hiroshima, where most all of his school friends were annihilated, he still was resolute in his love and hope for 'his' America . . . and instilled in each of his six children that this was the greatest of all countries."

Nehira spoke of her mother: "At the time of my birth my mother's physician in (Tule Lake) camp performed a tubal ligation (sterilization) on her. She never gave her consent."

And of her husband: "He is permanently disfigured due to burns over one-third of his body. Because the barracks we were assigned to had no hot running water.

LA Times  
8/9/81

# HEARINGS: A Catharsis for 'Quiet Americans'

Continued from Second Page

said, she started to remember "the terror of the days following Pearl Harbor, when I was afraid the FBI was going to come to take my father . . . to jail. My best friend's mother, who was a Japanese schoolteacher, and her father, who was a Buddhist priest, were taken away."

She also remembered the lineup before she and her family were bused to the Pomona Assembly Center, how scared she was and how her cousin threw up on the way.

There was, at one point Wednesday, comic relief in the testimony of Charles Hamasaki—before the war a fisherman off Terminal Island, today an auto repairman. In down-home dialect he told of his arrest by the FBI shortly after his graduation from San Pedro High School:

"On Feb. 2 (1942) two guys walk in my house 'Hey buddy, wake up,' and I ask, 'Who the hell are you guys?' . . . I ask, 'What the hell did I do?' and they say, 'Hey, we got a young one here.'"

Then, with a kind of gallows humor, he told how they were herded clad only in T-shirt, overcoat, bellbottoms and slippers and was put aboard a train that took him to Bismarck, N.D., where the temperature was 25 below zero.

"One thing I got to say, on the train they fed us real good . . . steak. You know what an old man say? 'They feed us because we're going to die.' I say, 'Nah, this is a democracy' . . ."

Eventually Hamasaki was released to the camp in Rowher, Ark.

## Assets Wiped Out

Matsuoka, the college counselor, spoke of his father, a poor but frugal pharmacist's helper who, he said, managed before the war to put a little money away into the Sumitomo Bank. After Pearl Harbor, the assets were frozen, "then eventually wiped off the books by the U.S. government as enemy assets. With one stroke my father's life savings ceased to exist."

Mary Ishizuka's father owned a nursery on Sepulveda and Wilshire boulevards. It covered 20 acres. His clients included Will Rogers and Shirley Temple. Ishizuka figured the family lost at least \$200,000.

Clarence Nishizu of Fullerton, said his family farmed 40 acres in Buena Park and 120 acres in Cypress. They lost it all, he said.

According to Larry Boss, a researcher at Cal State Long Beach who submitted a stack of records to the commission, the total loss in 1942 dollars was more than a billion and a half dollars—not the \$400 million estimated by the Federal Reserve Bank in San Francisco.

The most devastating testimony involved human loss. Dr. Mary T. Oda, a 1941 UCLA graduate, testified she was in her first year of medical school when she was forced to go to the camp at Gila River, Ariz.

In her practice in the San Fernando Valley today, she

said, "I have observed . . . the extremely high incidence of high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer among the survivors of camps. Life expectancy seems to be shortened by 10 to 15 years among us Japanese-Americans. One-third of my small circle of friends and peers are dead."

In her own family of nine, she said, an older sister developed bronchial asthma in camp, "a reaction to the terrible dust storms, and died . . . at 26." Her father, too sensitive to the dust and wind, died of nose and throat cancer, she said. And her younger sister suffered a nervous breakdown.

"I really don't want to say too much as to my reaction as to all of this," Judge Marutani said at the hearing's end, "but I must tell you that for me this is an ordeal."

"Maybe it's my Issei parents' upbringing not to show any emotion. But I want you to know you've been ripping into my heart all along."

LA Times

8/9/81