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WWII's 'Other' Detainees Press Claims Against U.S.

■ **Camps:** Japanese kidnapped from Latin America seek apology. They're refused because they weren't here legally.

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The police came to take the family away—a husband and wife and four children, each allowed to pack one suitcase. The family land, including a cotton plantation, was lost forever. Placed on a ship, guarded by soldiers with machine guns, they sailed across an ocean to an internment camp.

The camp was in Crystal City, Texas. And the soldiers with the doughboy helmets who took Alicia Nishimoto and her family from Peru were members of the U.S. Army.

It is a little-known, dark chapter in U.S. history. During World War II, the Roosevelt administration ordered the detention of more than

2,200 people of Japanese ancestry from 13 Latin American countries, the overwhelming majority from Peru.

Although no official explanation for the internment was ever offered, historians believe the Japanese Latin Americans were abducted for reasons similar to the much larger detention of Japanese Americans on the West Coast of the United States: They were believed to pose a military threat to the United States and its Pacific allies.

Nishimoto, then a 10-year-old citizen of Peru, spent two years in the Texas internment camp. Half a century later, she and hundreds of other abducted Latin American Japanese are still being denied an

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official letter of apology from the U.S. government.

The reason for the denial is a bureaucratic Catch-22 that has kept alive the sting of the old injustice. Since the Japanese Latin Americans were abducted and brought to the United States against their will, they were not legal U.S. residents, and thus, not eligible for an apology under the law.

"How can they call us illegal immigrants when we were forced to come here?" asks a dumbfounded Nishimoto, who has lived in Gardena for the past 33 years.

A few of the Japanese Peruvians were exchanged for Americans held in Japan, but most spent the duration of the war behind the barbed wire of the camp in southwest Texas. Some were held until 1948, three years after the war ended.

Frustrated after being denied both the apology and the redress payments first granted to Japanese American internees in 1990, the Latin American Japanese plan to file suit this week in federal Claims Court in Washington, D.C.

"These actions were a violation of international law," said Grace Shimizu, an activist in the movement for redress and the daughter of a Peruvian Japanese man held in the camps. "This was kidnapping civilians from a third country not at war, taking them across international waters and jailing them. It's important to hold the government accountable."

Officials with the Justice Department's Office of Redress Administration acknowledge that the abductions occurred, but say the Latin American Japanese are not covered by the provisions of the 1988 reparations law, which was restricted to those who were U.S. citizens and legal residents at the time of their detention.

Justice Department officials said Congress recognized the suffering of the Latin American Japanese in the 1982 report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. A small number of Peruvian Japanese did receive redress payments because they became legal residents before the June 1946 date established by the law.

Still, at least 300 applications by Latin American Japanese have been denied because they did not meet the redress law's residency requirements.

The former internees say the \$20,000 reparation payment is less important than etching their families' story in history.

"Our parents are the ones who suffered so much but they are gone," said Carmen Mochizuki of Montebello, a Japanese Peruvian whose father was deported to Japan from Texas and died in Okinawa soon after the war's end. "I feel sorry when I think of my parents and I'll feel that till I die."

Only 200 internees were allowed to return to Latin America after the war. Some traveled to Japan, others remained in the United States, eventually becoming citizens.

Decades removed from the Spanish-speaking lands of their birth, many of the Latin American Japanese retain a love for their former home and a nostalgia for South American culture.

Carmen Mochizuki greets a Latino reporter with a handshake and a "*mucho gusto*," while Art Shibayama recalls that in Spanish his name was Arturo—"My friends from Peru still call me that." Even Grace Shimizu, a generation removed from her father's Peruvian roots, retains a fondness for Peruvian recipes.

Still, for many, Peru and Latin America will forever be tarnished by memories of being abducted, uprooted from homes, schools and friendships.

Shibayama, now a 66-year-old resident of San Jose, remembers the years he lived in fear as a boy in Lima, Peru. Whenever a U.S. ship docked in the nearby port of Callao, his father would leave the city and go into hiding in the countryside.

Eventually, Shibayama's father was arrested, along with his wife and their six children. The affluent life they had known in Peru—Yuzo Shibayama was a textile importer, with chauffeurs and maids tending to the family's needs—was over.

Alicia Nishimoto has pictures of a similarly affluent family, posing somewhat stiffly next to a tricycle on the porch of their stucco hacienda in Jecum, Peru. Soon after that snapshot was taken, "One day they just came and took us."

Of the 13 governments that cooperated in the internment of the Latin American Japanese, Peru was the most enthusiastic, turning over 1,800 of its residents to the United States for internment. Peru was home to a relatively large Japanese community and many of those singled out for arrest were affluent businessmen and community leaders.

C. Harvey Gardiner, a historian whose book "Pawns in a Triangle of Hate" documents the abduction of the Peruvian Japanese, said their deportation was fueled in part by growing xenophobia in Peru, where the immigrants were seen as an economic threat.

The day Peruvian police arrived at Carmen Mochizuki's school, they demanded that the 11-year-old take them to her father.

She walked them to her home, told the police that she would need to go around the back to open the door, then warned her father who escaped out a back window. Eventually, he turned himself in.

Mochizuki, now 63, was the youngest of 10 children. "We knew that it was wartime but I really didn't know why they were doing this to us, why they would arrest us and put us in jail."

When the Peruvians agreed to the American request to detain the Japanese immigrants, most of the logistics were arranged informally, with phone calls and face-to-face meetings between officials and diplomats. Few decisions were committed to record, Gardiner says, because the officials involved were aware that "they were operating in a highly questionable area in terms of international law and in terms of fundamental morality."

The first U.S. ship, the *Etolin*, sailed from Callao in April 1942, with 141 Peruvian Japanese. The abductions continued for the next three years.

Shibayama recalls a journey in 1944 that lasted 21 days, the ship hugging the coastlines, escorted by gray destroyers and the low profiles of submarines. Men were in cabins below decks, separated from women and children. Few spoke English and confusion spread about their fate.

"My sister thought they were going to shoot us," Shibayama says.



IRIS SCHNEIDER / Los Angeles Times

Alicia Nishimoto and her family were shipped to a camp in Texas.

On the ship that took away Nishimoto's family, including her eight months' pregnant mother, was another rumor. "Some people were saying they were taking us to the Amazon."

Instead, both ships ended up in New Orleans, where the detainees were forced to disrobe and sprayed with DDT, an experience that was especially demeaning for the women. "You know Japanese ladies," Shibayama says. "They're very shy." Then came a railroad trip to Texas, in Pullman cars with the windows covered so that residents of passing towns, still angry over Pearl Harbor, wouldn't attack them.

The Texas internment center, converted from migrant worker housing, came to be known as a model camp. Many of the surviving internees were children then and have fond memories of camp life, where their ever-adaptable families learned to appreciate such American practices as baseball.

Nishimoto's father opened a tofu store in the camp (and his daughter's name was Americanized to Alice). Shibayama's father became a camp policeman.

Shibayama's father had him enroll in the camp's Japanese school because he thought it would be more practical than learning English. (There were no classes in Spanish.) In 2½ years, in the internment camp, Shibayama spoke only Spanish and Japanese.

When the war ended, the Latin American governments that had deported the detainees didn't want them anymore. Some, like Shibayama and his family, stayed in the United States, thanks only to a program that hired them out as cheap labor to the Seabrook Farms processing plant in New Jersey.

Nishimoto's father decided to

take his family to Japan—convinced that Japan had won the war. He held on to this belief even after the family had boarded a passenger ship in Seattle. Finally, they reached Tokyo Bay and saw American warships anchored there.

"That's when he knew Japan had lost the war," Alicia Nishimoto says.

Tokyo had been devastated by U.S. bombing raids that killed 124,000. The family moved on to the city where most of their relatives lived—Hiroshima, which months earlier had been leveled by the first atomic bomb.

At school, Nishimoto suffered through the indignity (and the irony) of schoolmates who called her "Yankee" because she had lived in the United States.

The Mochizuki family lived on sweet potatoes as hunger spread throughout the ravaged country, vivid memories Carmen has held onto for decades.

"Today, when I see the homeless, the suffering people in this country and I know what they are suffering. If I didn't go through that [in Japan], I would be a different person today, I would be selfish."

Both Mochizuki and Nishimoto eventually returned to the United States and married American citizens. Shibayama obtained legal residency in the United States and was drafted into the Army during the Korean War, serving in Germany, where a fellow soldier suggested that he apply for citizenship.

Despite the wartime deportations, the Japanese presence in Peru remained strong. Alberto Fujimori, the son of Japanese immigrants, was elected president in 1990. One of Nishimoto's cousins married another high-placed Japanese Peruvian, the

minister of interior.

In 1990, the Justice Department started presenting official letters of apology and \$20,000 checks to 60,000 surviving Japanese-American internees, the culmination of a long struggle for redress.

Most of the Latin American Japanese, however, received nothing. Shibayama, Nishimoto and Mochizuki all applied for redress and all received similar replies from the government: They did not qualify because they were not legal residents.

"My parents didn't want to come here," Mochizuki says. "They worked hard to build up what they had [in Peru]. Suddenly the war started and they lost everything."

For years, civil rights attorneys have tried unsuccessfully to persuade officials to grant exemptions to the Japanese Latin Americans, said Robin Toma, a Los Angeles attorney active in a coalition of groups seeking redress for the internees.

"We've met with the Office of Redress Administration and met with congressional staffers who've said there is nothing that can be done because the law is very clear," Toma said.

The lawsuit will name as plaintiffs the former internees who now live in Peru, Japan and the United States, demanding that they be granted the same status as interned Japanese Americans.

Because most of the internees—even those who were children in the camps—are now senior citizens, the lawsuit may represent a last chance for an official acknowledgment of their suffering while they are still living.

"Some day I will be gone," Mochizuki says, "but I want people to know everything that happened."