

10:16

Okamura, B. Isiko Sakai

Testimony

Aug. 13, 1981

83/115
C

Copy

~~Ans~~ Mrs. Hvizani
p. 8.

[O Komura - Juss
for "interviews"]

B. Taeko Sakai Okamura

B. Taeko Sakai Okamura

August ¹³~~11~~, 1981

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

B. Taeko Sakai Okamura
1150 Park Hills Road
Berkeley, California 94708

Mitoko Tsuda present

Born March 21, 1937 in Hollister, California
Citizen of the United States of America

Pre-war residence: farm near Hollister, California
Temporary Detention Camp: Rodeo Grounds, Salinas, Calif., May-June 1942
Concentration Camp: Colorado River, Poston, Ariz., July 1942-Oct. 1943
Segregation Camp: Tule Lake, Newell, Calif., Nov. 1943-Dec. 1945
Expatriation: Hiroshima, Japan, Jan. 1946-March 1949
Repatriation: Wailuku, Maui, Hawaii, April 1949-July 1955
Reunited with family: Monterey, Calif., August 1955

Present occupation: instructional aide, Berkeley Unified School District

Testimony written for the "Commission on Wartime Relocation
and Internment of Civilians" established by Public Law 96-317.
Submitted at the hearing in San Francisco, California on August 13, 1981.

Testimony By

B. Taeko Sakai Okamura
1150 Park Hills Road
Berkeley, California 94708

The following testimony is a personal account of my childhood experiences as a member of a no-no, renunciant, expatriate, repatriate, strandee, and returnee family. Our family was forcibly separated as a result of the policies of the United States government, and our suffering lasted long after the war ended. My ordeal lasted over thirteen years: from the time I was imprisoned as a child in an American concentration camp, to my expatriation to war-torn Japan and the devastation of Hiroshima, to my half-way return to Hawaii, and finally to my reunification with my family in 1955.

When the order for our imprisonment came in May, 1942, my father was farming two hundred seventy acres of leased land in Hollister, California. The government offered a total of ten thousand dollars for the crops, lease, tractors, irrigation equipment, and trucks, plus forty dollars for all the household furnishings which included six beds, five dressers, two stoves,

a refrigerator, and living room and dining room furniture. These amounts were only a tiny fraction of the total value but due to the lack of time, he had to accept the offer.

My parents, a younger sister, and I were first sent to the Salinas Rodeo Grounds. I was five years old at the time. On arrival, we were assigned to a room which was dirty and smelly and not fit for habitation. There were sacks hanging from the ceiling to partition off the rooms. The sewage system was leaking, creating a mess in the bathrooms and the inadequate supply of hot water was a problem for bathing and laundering.

During my short stay in Salinas, a growth was discovered in my right eye and the doctors recommended surgery. I had to go to a hospital outside of the camp for the surgery so my mother pleaded with the camp authorities to let her accompany me. The request was denied and I was sent to the hospital alone. Going to a hospital for surgery is a traumatic experience in itself. But for a young child who neither spoke nor understood any English and had very little social contact with anyone outside of her family, this was a doubly frightening experience.

On July 4, 1942 we were ordered to move to a more permanent concentration camp which turned out to be in the Arizona desert. Poston, Arizona was a place of intense heat and whirlwinds that kicked up the sand and dust that got into our rooms and made our lives miserable.

In early 1943, all citizens imprisoned in the concentration camps who were seventeen years of age or older were required to fill out a questionnaire regarding their allegiance and willingness to serve in the armed forces. My mother is a native-born American. She loved the United States and cherished her American citizenship. She was absolutely loyal and never would have done anything against the United States. However, she had four children who were stranded in Japan while they were visiting their grandparents; and her husband was a Japanese citizen who was prohibited by United States law from becoming an American citizen. She wrote "neutral" after the questions which she felt she could not answer either way because of these circumstances. But neutrality was not acceptable to the authorities, and she was called in for a personal interrogation. She desperately tried to explain her reasons for not answering the questions, but she was forced to make a choice. Under such duress, she had no choice but to answer in the negative. There was no way she could swear to harm her children in Japan or estrange herself from her husband.

Due to my mother's negative answers, in October, 1943, we were once again put on a train to yet another camp. Block 59, Tule Lake Segregation Camp, Newell, California was our destination.

Tule Lake was a very different place from either Salinas or Poston. Block 59 was occupied by people who had answered "no-no" to the questionnaire. People in Tule Lake were generally more outspoken about the conditions in the camp, our treatment as a people, the questionnaire, and the draft.

My sister and I were enrolled in a Japanese school in preparation for our eventual expatriation to Japan. Our teachers were generally pro-Japan and taught us not only how to read and write in Japanese but also to be proud as Japanese. Their goals were to teach us to be good Japanese so that we would not be embarrassed when we got to Japan.

We were often asked to wear red or white headbands and do marching exercises. We were awakened early every morning to the sound of a bugle. We had to hurriedly get dressed and gather at one end of the block where a leader led us in traditional Japanese calisthenics. As the sun rose, we bowed our heads to the east. This was to show our respect to the Emperor. We were also led in the clean-up of our block area before breakfast.

Our block was located on the southwest corner of the camp grounds. The double barbed wire fence was just beyond the next barrack from our compartment. A guard tower with uniformed men and weapons were in view at all times. Search lights were beamed onto the camp grounds at night. Uniformed men with weapons driving around in jeeps was a common sight. As a result of this experience, I used to be afraid of any white adult male for a very long time.

Demonstrations in protest of one thing or other was frequent. We very often locked ourselves in our room to avoid participating in these demonstrations. Physical violence and verbal abuses were common at these demonstrations where feelings ran high. And

whenever a large demonstration took place, we could always expect the camp authorities to send out soldiers to search our rooms for contraband. These searches were very thorough and everything was ransacked..

Life in Tule Lake Segregation Camp for children was not very pleasant. There was very little to do for entertainment. Toys were scarce. We often played hopscotch using the coal pieces from the pile in front of the bathroom area. Coal was fed into the furnace by a man to make hot water. Our mothers gave us outdated Wards or Sears catalogues so we could cut out the models to use as paper dolls. We also spent a great deal of time looking for tiny white shells which our mothers bleached and made into necklaces and pins.

The atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in August, 1945. That was horrifying news for my parents and many of their friends in camp who had relatives in Hiroshima. Many people came to our barrack and listened to the radio and cried. My parents were frantic when they heard the broadcast. They had four children in Hiroshima. They had not had any communication with them since the Pacific war started. We had no way of knowing if they had survived the bombing and if so where they could be or who was taking care of them.

With the news of Japan's surrender, Tule Lake became a very busy place. People were getting ready to move out of camp, either to go to Japan or move elsewhere.

Ottawa

My parents decided at this time that my mother and the three children (another sister was born in Tule Lake) should go to Japan and my father would stay in California. My father's assets were still frozen, so he wanted to stay and try to recover his funds. My mother had to go to Japan to see if her children and in-laws were still alive. Since independent civilian travel to Japan was impossible, the only way my mother could quickly get to Japan was to renounce her American citizenship and get on the expatriation ship. It was an agonizing decision but my mother renounced her citizenship.

After Christmas 1945, we were finally allowed to leave Tule Lake. My father left first. Then my mother, sisters, and I were put on a train for Astoria, Oregon to catch our ship to Japan. It was during the night and raining outside when our train slowed down at the Klamath Falls station. The window shades were closed, but someone told us to peek out. I looked out and there I saw my father standing in the rain, all alone, waving to us. I was not to see him again for nearly ten years.

We were only allowed to take things that we could carry by ourselves. My sister and I had huge knapsacks on our backs filled to the brim. My mother also had a knapsack plus a suitcase and a free hand to hold on to my little sister.

The ship we took to Japan was the General Gordon. We were in steerage where we were packed like sardines. There were rows upon rows of bunks, and just about everyone got seasick.

There was no privacy. The ocean was very rough and I was drenched every time I went on deck. It took us approximately ten days to get to Uraga, Japan.

We were once again herded into barracks in Uraga and kept there for approximately two weeks. The food in the American concentration camps was bad but the food in Uraga was worse. One of the things we were given was a hard biscuit called "katapan". The dog biscuits advertised on television remind me of them. Uraga in January was very cold but there was no heat in the building.

After what seemed like a long time, we were put on trains to be taken to our destination. The train was so crowded that one could not get up to even use the bathroom. And every time the train made a stop at a station, there were Japanese soldiers pounding on the windows with their shoe to let them in. These soldiers had no way of getting home since the Japanese railway system was not in operation at that time. Our train was run by the occupation forces and we were told to keep the windows closed. My sister used to have horrible nightmares about this experience.

My mother sent a telegram to my grandparents as soon as she found out when we would get to Hiroshima. But when we got to Hiroshima, no one was there to meet us. My mother knew where my grandparents lived so she decided we should walk there since there were no buses or taxis.

There is a large river that runs through Hiroshima. There

were some damaged and partly burned houses standing on the side of the river where we walked. But on the other side of the river, all I could see for miles and miles was charred, black, flat land with hardly a structure standing.

When we got to my grandparents' house, we were glad to find my grandparents and brother and three sisters safe. Their home was far enough away from the bombed area to escape any major damage. But we were not welcome in Japan. We were scornfully asked, "Why did you come here?" Food was scarce and life was very difficult. I broke out with boils all over the palms of both my hands. The doctor said it was malnutrition and I needed penicillin. Penicillin was very scarce and my mother was only able to get it through the black market.

I attended a school that was damaged but still standing. There were no glass in the windows. The winters were cold with no heating and my hands were frost bitten every winter. They turned purple and swelled till the skin could not stretch any more and burst.

My mother did not like Japan when she first went there in 1926 as a teenager. She liked it even less this time. She wanted to return to the United States as soon as she knew her family was safe. My grandparents were quite old so the burden of doing most of the hard labor on the farm fell on my mother's shoulders. There were no animals or machinery to help her lessen the burden.

Occupation forces were just arriving in Japan when we got there. My mother used to stop anybody in a United States army uniform with an Asian face to beg them to help her to get back to the United States. Someone told her that there is a Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) office in Hiroshima. She went there on numerous occasions to ask for help in returning to the United States. A man purporting to represent the JACL told her to bribe certain Japanese government officials with specific amounts of money or sugar or other American goods that my father sent her. She paid the bribes to no avail (no doubt the professed "JACL representative" was a fraud). My mother was an easy target for any con artist who gave her any hope of getting back to the United States. She knew she was being victimized but she persisted in her efforts to leave Japan at almost any cost.

By 1949, my father had re-established himself in Monterey, California and asked my brother and oldest sister to return to the United States. My mother wrote to her brother in Hawaii to ask if he would take two of her children. She felt that anything would be better for the children than staying in Japan. So in April, 1949, my brother, two sisters and I left Japan. My brother and oldest sister went on to California while my second sister and I stopped in Hawaii to live with my uncle and aunt. Now our family was split in three ways, Japan, Hawaii, and California. I cried when I left Japan. I thought I would never see either of my parents again. I suffered a terrible

stomach upset on the day of my departure and I was to suffer with this ailment often while in Hawaii. The doctors were never able to diagnose the cause of this pain. The mysterious stomach aches disappeared when I came back to California and rejoined my family.

I walked with a limp when I got to Hawaii. The Shriner's Hospital doctors found that one of my legs was an inch shorter than the other and diagnosed it to be caused by malnutrition. After several years of care and proper diet the doctors were amazed to see my legs even out. I lived in Hawaii for six and a half years. Life in Hawaii was much easier than in Japan but I missed my parents very much.

I was twelve years old when I got to Hawaii. I did not speak a word of English. I sat in a first grade classroom for three months. I did not graduate from high school until I was twenty years old.

In 1952, the racial restrictions for naturalization was eliminated and my father was able to become an American citizen, but my mother was still struggling to get back to the United States. Her numerous applications to the American consulate went unanswered. She says there were many times when she wanted to end her life in frustration. By 1954, my brother was in the United States army stationed in Japan, and he was trying without much success to get my mother repatriated to the United States. My father then by chance told someone in Carmel, California about the

plight of his wife and the difficulty she was having in getting back to this country. This person evidently knew Senator William Knowland and related the story to him. Senator Knowland kindly sent a letter on behalf of my mother to the American Embassy in Japan saying he had a special interest in her case. Magically, the doors opened and my mother and two remaining sisters were authorized to take the next ship headed for the United States. Even at the last minute, some unscrupulous person sent a false telegram telling her not to come to the port, because there was no space on the ship (possibly for an impostor to take her place), but my mother was so determined to leave that nothing could stop her from boarding the ship.

My mother says she cried with joy when the ship left Japan. Her long exile was over and she was finally on her way home. She says she cannot express in words the elation she felt when she first saw the coast of California once again. Eventually, my mother's American citizenship was restored due to the efforts of attorney Wayne Collins. My parents were reunited after almost nine years of separation. My own ordeal was to continue for another year. I was finally reunited with my family in August, 1955. I had not seen my mother for six and a half years and my father for nine and a half years. I left the United States for Japan when I was eight years old and went to Hawaii when I was twelve. I was eighteen years old by the time I was reunited with my family.

My parents are celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary this year. I think it is a miracle that both my parents have survived the ordeal of all those years of separation and struggle.

My mother still suffers both physically and emotionally from those years of ordeal. She has had several operations on her right leg in the last ten years which I am sure are due to the physical hardships she went through in Japan. She seems to have a compulsion to talk about her experiences whenever I visit her. This is very emotionally upsetting to her, but it seems a very necessary thing for her to do. I don't think my mother will ever fully recover from her ordeals.

No monetary sum could ever compensate us fully for all the years of suffering. However, I think some token amount should be paid us in restitution. Fifty thousand dollars per person is the minimum amount that would be acceptable considering the length and severity of our suffering. I would like the restitution to be paid very soon so my parents can gain some benefit from it.

Appendix

Summary of Our Family Odyssey

<u>Year</u>	<u>In California</u>	<u>In American Concentration Camps</u>	<u>In Japan</u>	<u>In Hawaii</u>
1940	self, Father, Mother, brother, 4 sisters	-----	-----	-----
1941	self, Father, Mother, sister	-----	brother, 3 sisters	-----
1942-1945	-----	self, Father, Mother 2 sisters	brother, 3 sisters	-----
1946-1948	Father	-----	self, Mother, brother, 5 sisters	-----
1949-1951	Father, brother, sister	-----	Mother, 3 sisters	self, sister
1952-1953	Father, brother, 2 sisters	-----	Mother, 2 sisters	self, sister
1954	Father, Mother, brother, 4 sisters	-----	-----	self, sister
1955	self, Father, Mother, brother, 5 sisters	-----	-----	-----