

JAPANESE AMERICAN JOURNALISM
DURING WORLD WAR II

Mr. Chairman and leaders of the Ethnic Society: By its very nature, journalism in the concentration camps of the early Forties was not free. While superficial type of freedom existed, the camp press on the whole was dominated and controlled by the War Relocation Authority. Evidence of this can be found in the dearth of materials critical of the eviction process and the system of confinement and regimentation the internees were forced to endure. The inmates were constantly confronted with stark daily reminders of their captive state by their simple barrack abodes, the barbed wire compounds patrolled by military police and guarded by armed sentries perched in their watchtowers. These were symbols of the rapaciousness of government trespass upon their fundamental constitutional rights. But all this was ignored by the passive corp of Nisei writers. Instead, they dwelt on the pleasanter and inane aspects of living as if the historical issue of the Japanese American Experience never existed. Camp organs were strangely devoid of establishment negativism!

This situation could hardly be attributed to any lack of literary talents. At this period, Nisei literature was nearing the apex of its blossoming. As a group, it had begun to mature not merely in proficiency but also in perspectives and seasoning. It is easy to identify such budding literati as Toshio Mori, Kenny Murase, Charles Kikuchi, Toyo Suyemoto, Chiye Mori, Bill Hosokawa, Ken Tashiro, Molly Oyama, et al. What was clearly evident was the stringent control exercised by Reports Officials of the WRA. This trend towards literary conformity gave due recognition and acquiescence to the JAACL's imaging posture and the more practical desire to avoid incurring administrative reprisals.

In respect to superficial freedom first mentioned, it is best illustrated and exemplified in the editorial comments initially greeting the segregated nature of the Nisei Combat Battalion in early 1944. There arose a spontaneous outcry ^{against} the 442nd's racial aspects. This criticism was quickly doused. It was replaced with huzzahs and a hallelujah chorus of uniform approval. Best of our example is the flip-flop of the Heart Mountain Sentinel. It characterized the

Nisei Battalion as "Jim Crowism" in its critical editorial SELECTED SERVICE LIMITED. Then, it made a right-about face to ardently embrace this concept. In March 29, 1944, I raised this rhetorical question: "Does freedom of the press exist in War Relocation Center?" It was titled FREEDOM OF THE PRESS and went on to state: "It would not seem so if our opinions were to be based on the editorial expressions of camp organs. Instead, it would indicate a controlled press."

Outside the camps, generally referred to as the 'free zone', Nisei journalism was represented by three major publications, the Utah Nippo in Salt Lake City and two in Denver ---- the Rocky Nippon (later Rocky Shimpo) and The Colorado Times. In addition, there was the in-house Pacific Citizen weekly of the JACL, also in Salt Lake City. Oddly enough, all three Japanese Sections kept offending the censors throughout the war despite the subsidized character of The Colorado Times. In the fall of 1943, the publisher of Rocky Nippon was arrested and interned at the Santa Fe Internment Center in Northern New Mexico. His arrest placed the publication under the stewardship of the Enemy Alien Property Custodian. In the meantime, the newspaper legally changed its name to Rocky Shimpo.

Only two ex-West Coast products of Nisei journalism functioned at any time on a major racial publication ---- Lawrence Tajiri at the Pacific Citizen and yours truly with the Rocky Shimpo and we pursued divergent paths. I assumed English Section editorship and Public Relations duties in mid-January of 1944, almost coincident with the reinstatement of the draft. However, editorial opinions had been expressed in its predecessor publication and earlier in The Colorado Times. It was under this tutelage that the Rocky Shimpo became a militant force in wartime Nisei journalism. The Shimpo took up the cudgel for Nisei rights which are the rights of all Americans under our Constitution. It scorched the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration for preemptory eviction and illegal detention in violation of our constitutional grants. The other English Language Departments all hewed to the JACL policy of collaboration and accommodation and to its narrow philosophy of favorable public imaging. It was not until the fall of 1942 that The Colorado Times transformed into a pro-JACL organ with its collusion with the government through the channel of the Office of War Information.

I would like to digress a few minutes at this point to discuss the Resistance. You have just heard from my compatriot, Frank Emi, the story of The Fair Play Committee of Heart Mountain. I would like to call your attention to another group ---- the Military Resisters of Fort McClellan. I would be remiss if I were not to mention a third group and also in the military, the 1800 Engineers Service Battalion. However, we are concerned this afternoon with the McClellan Twenty-One who underwent court-martial. Their story goes further back. When West Coast people of Japanese descent were marked for eviction, there were some 5,000 Nisei serving in the United States Army. Those who were assigned on the Pacific Coast were transferred inland, mostly to Fort Riley in Kansas which became the staging ground for Nisei Soldiers. All those who carried arms were stripped of their weapons and assigned to menial duties such as K.P., latrine detail, yard cleanup, stableboys, et al. On Easter morn of 1943, President Roosevelt made an inspection tour of the Fort Riley Post and delivered an Easter Message. He was returning to Washington after a hemispheric Defense Consultation with President Camacho of Mexico.

At 2 a.m. on Easter morn, 100 Nisei soldiers were routed out of bed and after the regular morning functions and breakfast were ordered onto trucks and carted twenty miles to a field where they were assigned to digging postholes and stringing barbed wire fencing. Some engaged in trash pickup along the highway. All had guns trained upon them as they worked. Passing motorists were won't to shout: "Look, Jap prisoners!" Those assigned to the Motor Pool were marched to the Motor Pool Building and guarded with drawn firearms, including machine guns. In this group, there were about 150 Nisei. Others on duty cleaning stables were also marched off to the Mechanics School Building -- roughly 200 more Nisei soldiers -- and were also held at gunpoint on the second floor. One of the Nisei looked out of the window and reported seeing three machine guns trained at the building. To place this Incident in its proper perspective, Nisei assigned to Headquarters Staff were permitted to see and hear President Roosevelt's Easter Message with their Anglo compatriots.

It was out of the Fort Riley group --- 600 of whom were sent to Fort McClellan for combat training as replacement for the 442nd ---- that the McClellan Twenty-One developed. We have a tend-

ency to believe wire service report that these men refused to bear arms for Uncle Sam. There was another story ---- the real story hidden by wartime racism. The commandment had publicly announced that anyone with problems ^{could} discuss them with ^{the} Officer-in-Charge. But the Officers-in-Charge turned a deaf ear to counseling. Actually, there were twenty-eight men involved but Seven beat the court martial. The Twenty-One received from five to thirty years. Some of you know by now that in 1982, Eleven who challenged this court martial won all their rights, and awards back. I thought it was important that you heard this esoteric account.

Now that I have used a good portion of my time, I will leap-frog to the derogation of the Resistance by the JACL. The 262-pardoned camp Resisters was an important but simply a small part in quantity in the Resistance Movement. In the recent book THEY CALL ME MOSES MASAOKA, the author belittles the camp Resisters as a "relatively small number of dissidents in the face of gross injustice." (p. 179). Statistics seldom tell the true story and Hosokawa's perspective is myopic. In every camp, rebellion ensued. True, the majority yielded to the mandate of obedience ultimately. But what of the 20 others the Truman Amnesty Board pardoned? What of the 16,080 segregants who responded "No", qualified answers, or refused to respond to the defective Loyalty Questions? Are we forgetting the McClellan Twenty-Eight who faced court martial and the uncounted Nisei in the 1800 Engineers Service Battalion? But without them, our figure is now upward of 16,436 which represent 21 percent of the 77,957 eligible Loyalty group. That is closer to identifying the nature of the Resistance Movement that prevailed.

Those who have had the privilege of witnessing the Bicentennial Celebration of our Constitution: "A More Perfect Union" should be aware that the prestigious Smithsonian Institution appropriately recognized the Loyalty Segregants, The Fair Play Committee of Heart Mountain, and the McClellan Twenty-One. They have been provided a prominent spot in the Exhibit. This was in appreciation of their fidelity to the fundamental precepts of the nation's sacrosanct document and the spirit those of the Resistance symbolized in the continuing struggle of freedom-loving people to authoritative oppression. These Resisters kept this faith and in the process re-

claimed the tarnished dignity of the Japanese Americans who ^{responded to} submissively the onus of captivity. In this context, the JACL derogation is spurious. And, the aspersions of our heroic Nisei Soldiers must be viewed as untenable. I thank you for your indulgence.

***** ***** *****

The Japanese American Reconstruction Period lasted nearly a quarter of a century and thus led to the delay of Nisei literature on a grander scale. Nisei writers began to tell their own accounts of the tragedy which befelled them as the decade of the Seventies began. First came the book NISEI which chronicled the sojourners and the shipwrecks for the first 140-odd pages but soon lapsed into a JACL propaganda instead of the popular history it presumed to offer. Then followed a burst of narratives dominated by JACL figureheads and faithfuls such as Frank Chuman, Budd Fukei, John Tateishi, James Oda, Karl Yoneda, Bill Hosokawa again and again and again. Out of this morass came Years of Infamy written by a New York costume designer named Michi Nishiura Weglyn. This is without peer the best depiction of the tragic event from the pen of a Japanese American writer. Years of Infamy is not a recycled version as much Japanese American writings are. At the time of its publication, the book introduced significant new details other "evacuation" authors have utilized to chronicle their own works.

By an odd twist, the Japanese American Citizens League which had gone down the tube with its collaboration policy rose out of its shambles to a position of considerable power and racial influence unmatched in Asian circles. In this modern era, the League maintains its current prominence by control of the essential process of politics and the media. The major sources of communication are either owned by League officials or beholdened to it. Others are easily intimidated which is highly effective in any provincial society. In such deleterious climate, news become managed. The worst offender in the racial community appears to be the Hokubei Mainichi of San Francisco which sedulously edit commentaries as if such materials were standard news items and within its editorial purview. This demonstrates a lack of professionalism and intrudes upon the free flow of ideas and creative thoughts, the very foundation of literary

creation. It is a failure to use the proper tool at hand ---- editorial disclaimers.

Some of you in this audience may be curious to know how I fit in. We all develop certain specialties in our endeavors and it is especially gratifying to have been recognized as an editorialist. I was unseasoned when I first came in conflict with the National JACL in the early Thirties. Unusual as it may seem, this confrontation was not a conscious thing and actually forced upon me by the then national secretary Saburo Kido. It shocked me to learn of the introduction of a censure resolution at the JACL's Third Biennial San Francisco Convention. The action failed! It did pique an interest to learn what the group was all about. This confrontation successively moved from threats and intimidation to economic reprisals to public ostracism and to sordid sanctions. In the spring of 1942 as eviction from the West Coast neared, Mike Masaoka was brazen enough to identify me as "Public Enemy No. 1 of the JACL" at a public meeting in San Francisco. This was probably in reaction to my opposition to its collaboration policy before the Tolson Committee.

There appears to be a mistaken belief that I editorially prodded resistance in the concentration camps. The catalog of JARP Interview Tapes at UCLA makes this claim. In a less indirect way, a doctoral thesis at Pittsburgh University appears to intimate this conclusion. The United States Government confirms this thinking in filing legal proceedings. But Resistance was a loaded gun ready to explode! It was not until thirty-five Nisei draftees had already resisted that the first editorial on the subject was written. This action was taken in concern over explosive media quotes of disloyalty from the Resisters. It was apparent that the Resisters needed some type of anchor to justify their actions. I gave them their violated constitutional rights. The editorial made it clear that individual resistance was purposeless. When the Fair Play Committee of Heart Mountain entered the picture to campaign for clarification of its citizenship status and a demand for restoration of the Nisei's constitutional rights, their actions appealed to me. I supported this group. It would lead me to a federal court trial and acquittal.

The Cheyenne Conspiracy Trial was neither the end or the beginning of the ordeal. It would take another full year before offi-

cial efforts would cease and government harassment end. It makes one wonder at the persistence with which conviction was pursued. I had reached Denver at 4:45 p.m. on April 2, 1942, a Friday. I would be subject to government vendetta on the first working day around 8 a.m. This was followed by business harassment and allegation of false Selective Service registration before coming cropper in the Conspiracy Trial. After the acquittal, the allegation was sedition --- the JACL's favorite advocacy.

This was a lonely struggle. It cannot be said the Japanese people provided any moral or financial support. Reaction of Colorado Japanese were particularly vicious prior to the trial and immediately after the acquittal. Campaigners of the Defense Fund drive were avoided on the streets, gang-beaten in an alley, intimidated with bodily harm, shown the door, supposed friends distanced themselves, and long business relationship broken. This was not confined to Colorado alone. It was the same in the camps and in the "free zone". Whatever moral support at least would have to come from establishment sources. Such professionals of the Fourth Estate as Chester Rowell of the San Francisco Chronicle and Lee Casey, vice-president of The Rocky Mountain News of Denver, offered this support. Others came from M.S. Reynolds, U.S. Commissioner for Wyoming; L.C. Sampson, secretary of the Wyoming Bar Association; A.L. Wirin, American Civil Liberties Union attorney of Los Angeles; Frank Cooper, bail bondsman of Phoenix, Arizona; and Vern Lechliter, reporter for the Wyoming Eagle. Does it seem strange that not a single person of Japanese descent can be listed?

If the Japanese American community of Denver and the environs reached its verdict at time of arrest, it was made more emphatic after acquittal. I would be hounded from job to job by the Nisei to deny me employment. It would take three months before I would find an employer who would disregard such tactics and I would be hired. Such unbecoming antics are reflections on the Japanese people and specifically upon the Nisei generation in the chaos of the time. It led to my withdrawal from the Japanese community which still remain and isolation of thirty-four years from Asian affairs. It was a Chinese American playwright and a Sansei educator and the favorable reception accorded at the Seattle hearings of the Commission on Wartime

Relocation and Internment of Civilians in 1981 that lured me out of
obscurity. But primarily, it was the encouragement of Frank Chin
that is responsible for a return to the writing profession.

----- 30 -----

(Presentation to the Fifth National Conference of
the Association for Asian American Studies, Wash-
ington State University at Pullman, Washington, March
24-27, 1988)

This presentation was written
March 12, 1988 at Denver,
Colorado, 1455 South Irving
Street.----- JAMES M. OMURA.