

JAPANESE - AMERICAN TESTIMONY

from

THE NATIONAL DEFENSE MIGRATION HEARINGS 1942

In February 1942, President Roosevelt ordered the arrest and detention of all “enemy aliens” located in areas vital to the national defense. This excerpt is from testimony given by the Japanese-American civic leaders Mike Masaoka, Henry Tani, and James Omura before a congressional committee investigating ways to carry out Roosevelt’s order. As a result of this measure, more than 110,000 Japanese Americans (including children) were forcibly taken from their homes and jobs, and sent to live in internment camps.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Summarizing

Based on your analysis of this testimony, what information does the Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration seek to establish, and why?

MR. SPARKMAN: First, will you give your name to the reporter?

MR. MASAOKA: Just to show you how Americanized we are, I have an English name and Japanese tag-end there. Mike Masaoka, I am the national secretary and field executive of the Japanese American Citizens League. This gentleman is Mr. Dave Tatsuno, president of the San Francisco chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. And Mr. Henry Tani, the executive secretary of our group....

MR. SPARKMAN: Did you ever attend Japanese schools in this country?

MR. MASAOKA: Personally I did not, but frankly—

MR. SPARKMAN (*interposing*): A great many of your people do?

MR. MASAOKA: Oh, yes. But I did not...

MR. SPARKMAN: What about the membership of your organization? Could you say what percentage of them have received at least a part of their education in Japan?

MR. MASAOKA: Those figures are rather hard to get. We estimate approximately 20 to 30 per cent, which I think is a rather generous estimate.

MR. SPARKMAN: I wonder if you could give us some estimate as to a portion of your membership who have received a part of their education in Japanese schools in this country.

MR. MASAOKA: That would be large; say 85 per cent.

MR. SPARKMAN: That is more or less characteristic, is it not, of the Japanese to have these Japanese schools?

MR. MASAOKA: Yes. It is characteristic, but at the same time I think it is the same as any other immigrant group. I have correspondence here which we will file to show that we have attempted from time to time to get the State of California to include it in their public-school curricula and other evidence of the sort....

I feel that I should make this statement at this time: That before Pearl Harbor many of us had been teaching, or at least attempts had been made to teach, concerning the honor of Japan as a nation. But I think the attack at Pearl Harbor demonstrated to those who were on the fence that there wasn't anything honorable in that, and I think most of us condemned more than Americans condemned the dastardly thing that was done there, and I think the first generation feel that.

MR. SPARKMAN: Do you think you could say with reference to the membership of your organization that there is not a feeling of a definite connection and loyalty to the Emperor of Japan?

MR. MASAOKA: No. I don't think our league subscribes to that. I don't think the great membership of our league subscribe to that. In fact, I am quite sure.

MR. SPARKMAN: Do you think you could truthfully and sincerely say that there is not in your membership a feeling of pride on the accomplishments of the Japanese Empire?

MR. MASAOKA: Well now, there are a lot of things that I think we ought to recognize that are fine about Japan, possibly courtesy, and so on. But I think that the Japan of our parents is certainly not the Japan of today, and I think there that we may have been misguided as to many things there, too....

MR. SPARKMAN: Let me ask you this. Of course, you appreciate that the feeling which you have heard expressed here does exist?

MR. MASAOKA: Yes, I do. I certainly do.

MR. SPARKMAN: You acknowledge that fact. Do I understand that it is your attitude that the Japanese-American citizens do not protest necessarily against an evacuation? They simply want to lodge their claims to consideration?

MR. MASAOKA: Yes.

MR. SPARKMAN: But in the event the evacuation is deemed necessary by those having charge of the defenses, as loyal Americans you are willing to prove your loyalty by cooperating?

MR. MASAOKA: Yes. I think it should be—

MR. SPARKMAN (*interposing*): Even at a sacrifice?

MR. MASAOKA: Oh, yes; definitely. I think that all of us are called upon to make sacrifices. I think that we will be called upon to make greater sacrifices than any others. But I think sincerely, if the military say "Move out," we will be glad to move, because we recognize that even behind evacuation there is not just national security but also a thought as to our own welfare and security because we may be subject to mob violence and otherwise if we are permitted to remain.

MR. SPARKMAN: And it affords you, as a matter of fact, perhaps the best test of your own loyalty?

MR. MASAOKA: Provided that the military or the people charged with the responsibility are cognizant of all the facts....

MR. TANI: ...With reference to the line of questioning that you are asking Mr. Masaoka, about the influence of the Japanese culture in us. We don't walk around with our heads bowed because we are Japanese, but we can't help being Japanese in features. My mother left Japan over 30 years ago, and the Japan of which she speaks to us of 30 years ago is not the Japan of today. I feel it is different from that of my mother's day. And so in the culture that she instilled in us, and by "culture" I mean courtesy, loyalty to the State and country in which we are, obedience to parents, those are cultures of Japan with which most of us have been brought up. And I don't think those things are things of which we should be ashamed, those things which we should ignore.

As for influences upon us today I, as an individual, or as a leader of a group, have never been approached officially, unofficially, directly, or indirectly in any respect in all my years.

MR. OMURA: ...I am strongly opposed to mass evacuation of American-born Japanese. It is my honest belief that such an action would not solve the question of Nisei loyalty. If any such action is taken I believe that we would be only procrastinating on the question of loyalty, that we are afraid to deal with it, and that at this, our first opportunity, we are trying to strip the Nisei of their opportunity to prove their loyalty.

I do not believe there has ever been, or ever could be again, a situation of this kind where the Nisei can prove their loyalty.

I suppose you understand that I am in some measure opposed to what some of the other representatives of the Japanese community have said here before this committee....

It is doubtlessly rather difficult for Caucasian Americans to properly comprehend and believe in what we say. Our citizenship has even been attacked as an evil cloak under which we expect immunity for the nefarious purpose of conspiring to destroy the American way of life. To us—who have been born, raised, and educated in American institutions and in our system of public schools, knowing and owing no other allegiance than to the United States—such a thought is manifestly unfair and ambiguous.

I would like to ask the committee: Has the Gestapo come to America? Have we not risen in righteous anger at Hitler's mistreatments of the Jews? Then, is it not incongruous that citizen Americans of Japanese descent should be similarly mistreated and persecuted? I speak from a humanitarian standpoint and from a realistic and not a theoretical point of view. This view, I believe, does not endanger the national security of this country nor jeopardize our war efforts....

We cannot understand why General DeWitt can make exceptions for families of German and Italian soldiers in the armed forces of the United States while ignoring the civil rights of the Nisei Americans. Are we to be condemned merely on the basis of our racial origin? Is citizenship such a light and transient thing that that which is our inalienable right in normal times can be torn from us in times of war?

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