Prisoner in My Homeland Full Historical Background

Japanese Immigration

After the 1868 overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate and the Meiji Restoration in Japan, immigration to the Territory of Hawaii and the continental United States began in significant numbers. Prior to 1850, Japan had remained closed to most foreign trade and influence, but U.S. pressure to open trade and diplomatic relations forced wide-ranging changes throughout Japanese society, especially in the rural countryside. Economic conditions in the 1880s pushed many rural families into poverty and into urban centers within Japan; as jobs proved scarce, migration to Hawaii or the west coast of the U.S. became an appealing option. These changes in Japan coincided with the industrial and economic expansion of the United States as well as its imperialistic westward expansion. Prior to the 1880s, most Japanese emigrants traveled to Hawaii as contract laborers, indentured to work on sugar plantations, while a smaller number traveled to the mainland U.S. to seek education or business opportunities. Most Japanese immigrants were men who intended to return to Japan once they had earned sufficient funds abroad. Nevertheless many settled permanently in the U.S. and began to establish communities that supported Japanese social and cultural life and assisted new immigrants in acclimating to life in America.

Within the U.S., work opportunities for Japanese immigrants increased after Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Agricultural, lumber, and mining interests in the western U.S. began seeking Japanese immigrants to replace Chinese immigrants. From the 1880s until 1907 (when the Gentlemen's Agreement limited migration from Japan) over 130,000 Japanese immigrated to Hawaii and the U.S. Many initially found work in Hawaii and then moved to the mainland for better wages. By the turn of the twentieth century, Japanese immigrants had formed communities in the major western cities and had established themselves as successful small farmers as far east as Colorado. As their numbers increased, Japanese workers experienced anti-Asian prejudice and discrimination similar to that faced by the Chinese. Widespread economic anxiety and racism within the American labor movement helped sweep a brutal anti-Chinese movement across the western U.S. in the 1870s, leading to the first racially based immigration restriction law and highly visible racist propaganda which painted all Asians as morally suspect, socially undesirable, and even dangerous. *Issei* (Japanese-born U.S. residents) and *Nisei* (U.S.-born children of immigrants) responded by forming civic organizations to fight against discrimination and represent Japanese American interests. In 1929, a number of these organizations joined to form the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) which would become the largest and most influential association.

Anti-Japanese Discrimination

In 1905, The Asiatic Exclusion League formed in San Francisco. The group represented a wide range of individuals and perspectives, but white laborers who blamed Asians for increased unemployment and decreased wages were among the most vocal adherents. The League's political and media campaign dramatically affected the Japanese American community and forced changes in U.S. law. In 1906, the organization fought to create a segregated school for Japanese students in San Francisco, which Japanese residents argued would violate an 1894 treaty between Japan and the U.S. that guaranteed immigrants equal rights. Seeking to avoid a diplomatic crisis, the U.S. government and Japan in 1907 signed the Gentlemen's Agreement. In it, Japan agreed to stop granting passports to Japanese laborers intending to emigrate to the

United States, and the U.S. would allow immigrants who were previously established in the U.S. to return and to bring a parent, spouse, or child to join them. While limiting future migration, the agreement allowed previous immigrants to bring over their so-called “picture brides” and establish families in the United States.

The success of many Japanese American families in small-scale farming on land that was often subpar sparked fears of competition and resentment among exclusionists who then began to propose legislation to prohibit or limit Japanese immigrants’ access to land. From 1913 to the end of World War II, twelve western states, from Arkansas to Washington, passed Alien Land Laws that prohibited Japanese immigrants and those of Japanese descent from owning land. Some states even restricted the leasing of land by immigrants ineligible for citizenship, which included all Asian immigrants. The Immigration Act of 1924 prohibited immigration from most of Asia, set quotas on the number of immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere, and established the U.S. Border Patrol and a system for enforcing immigration restrictions. Many of these restrictions remained in force until 1965. Some of the public leaders active in the exclusionist movement played a role in the later decision to remove Japanese Americans from the west coast during World War II. In addition, by treating *Issei* and *Nisei* residents as undesirable and undeserving of the rights of citizens, the exclusionary laws helped establish a foundation for the war-time measures

Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community

In Puget Sound near Seattle, Washington, Bainbridge Island was home to a vibrant Japanese American community prior to World War II. The island and the surrounding region’s first settlers were Native Americans of the Squamish nation. The impressive stands of old growth Douglass fir trees along with deep water ports attracted commercial shipbuilders and lumber companies to the island, and in 1863 the Port Blakely sawmill opened. Workers from around the globe found employment at the sawmill, including a number of Japanese who arrived in the 1880s. With stable mill jobs, immigrants brought wives from Japan. By the time the sawmill closed in the 1920s, over fifty Japanese American families had settled on Bainbridge Island. Many branched out from mill work to strawberry farming. Unlike the segregated Japanese American neighborhoods of some of the west coast urban centers, Japanese Americans on Bainbridge Island were integrated with the white community and owned businesses, including farms, greenhouses, nurseries, a grocery store, and a hotel. In 1941, 227 Japanese Americans lived on Bainbridge Island. There were also several military installations on and near the island, which raised fears among some government leaders.

Japan’s Entry into World War II

Thanks to rapid industrialization and militarization from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 through the 1910s, the Empire of Japan emerged as an economic world power and a colonial power in Asia. The Meiji Constitution established a parliamentary form of government, and granted the Emperor extensive power and responsibility. During the 1920s, Japan strengthened its democratic system of government, but in the 1930s the international economic crisis sharply reduced Japan’s exports and generated mass unemployment, creating political instability and increasing the power of the military. Japan’s authoritarian government also scrambled to maintain access to raw materials and bolster its regional economic strength by diminishing

Europe's and the U.S.'s economic influence in Asia. In 1931, the Japanese Imperial Army occupied Manchuria and then gradually extended control over all of northern China. Although the League of Nations condemned the invasion, it imposed no sanctions. In 1937, full-scale war broke out between Japan and China. That year, the Japanese captured the Chinese capital of Nanking, slaughtering close to 300,000 civilians. In China, a civil war between Communists, led by Mao Zedong, and Jiang Jieshi's (Chiang Kai-shek's) nationalists weakened resistance to the Japanese occupation.

Japan's victories in China led it to proclaim a "New Order in East Asia," and in September 1940, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy. The agreement sought to "establish and maintain a new order of things" within countries' spheres of influence, with Germany and Italy in Europe, and Japan in Asia. The signatories also agreed to provide mutual protection and economic and technological cooperation. Although the U.S. had allied with Japan during World War I and its invasion of Siberia, the invasion of China pushed public opinion against Japan and strained diplomatic relations. When Japan invaded French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) and occupied former French airfields, the U.S. government froze all Japanese assets in the U.S. and imposed an oil embargo on Japan. Faced with serious shortages as a result of the oil embargo, and convinced that the U.S. officials had given up on diplomatic solutions, Japan's leaders decided to attack the U.S. Despite rumors of an imminent attack, U.S. leaders had disregarded Japan's military strength and were surprised when Japanese planes bombed the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The U.S. declared war on Japan the next day.

Executive Order 9066

The U.S. government's view of the threat posed by "enemy aliens" -- non-citizen residents in America from warring countries -- revealed inconsistent policies that changed over time and reflected the deep-seated anti-Asian views that had shaped earlier immigration laws. Military intelligence agencies and the FBI had been monitoring foreign nationals from Germany, Japan, and Italy since the 1930s to thwart potential acts of espionage, sabotage, or so-called fifth-column activities. In 1939, the FBI created a Custodial Detention list that targeted German and Italian nationals and citizens of German and Italian ancestry along with those with Communist sympathies for arrest and internment if the situation should require such action. Japanese and Japanese American organizations were added to the list in October 1941, although there was no evidence that any Japanese Americans were saboteurs or spies for the Japanese government. Soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, FBI agents and local law enforcement officers arrested 2,300 so-called "enemy aliens" of whom some 1,300 were Japanese. On Terminal Island, a Japanese fishing community in Los Angeles, the FBI rounded up all the male Japanese nationals. In December the Justice Department approved searches of Japanese American households without a search warrant if "the time is insufficient in which to procure a warrant." Hundreds of households were raided, and Justice Department and local law enforcement agents confiscated a wide range of innocuous items including radios, photographic equipment, and farming materials.

U.S. government and military leaders debated other responses to the perceived threat posed by Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans. Although no evidence of sabotage had

surfaced, General John DeWitt of the Western Defense Command successfully argued for a rapid and extensive forced removal of all Japanese along the West Coast. Some in the Justice Department questioned the legality of the removal and arrest of American citizens of Japanese descent as well as Japanese nationals (who were prohibited by law from becoming citizens) without proof of disloyalty, but a growing anti-Japanese campaign among politicians and journalists convinced the department to concede. President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. Executive Order 9066 authorized the forced removal and incarceration of approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans who lived in the designated military zone, which comprised all of California, southern Arizona, the western portion of Oregon, and Washington. In March, the government imposed a curfew in these areas requiring anyone of Japanese ancestry to remain at home from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. About two-thirds of this group (80,000 people) were U.S. citizens whose parents or grandparents had come earlier in the century. The JACL worked hard to persuade the government that Japanese Americans were loyal citizens and opposed the removal and incarceration. After the Order went into effect, the JACL tried to help make the removal as orderly as possible. The JACL's cooperation with the U.S. government was controversial within the Japanese American community.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans already serving in the U.S. military were discharged or disarmed and given menial tasks. In early 1942, the Selective Service excluded Japanese Americans from the wartime draft, claiming their ancestry made them unacceptable. Japanese in Hawaii were able to continue in the service and many served in intelligence units and as translators. In 1943, the U.S. military reversed these earlier restrictions and instead required a new loyalty questionnaire. All *Nisei* males of draft age in the prison camps had to complete this questionnaire and respond to loyalty questions before a military draft board. All *Issei* and *Nisei* women filled out a separate loyalty questionnaire to determine if they could leave the camps for work or education. In February 1943, President Roosevelt announced the creation of an all-Japanese army battalion, and began recruiting volunteers. While over 10,000 Japanese Americans from Hawaii (who, for the most part, had not been removed from their homes and imprisoned) volunteered for the 442nd Infantry Regiment, fewer than 1,000 of those in the prison camps enrolled. The all-Japanese American 442nd fought in the European Theater mostly in Italy, southern France, and Germany and became the most decorated military unit in U.S. history for its size and length of service

Racist Anti-Japanese Propaganda

As the U.S. military ramped up for war, the government and military created new agencies to build support for the war, mobilize citizens, and denounce the enemy. Japan was singled out as more threatening to the U.S. than either Germany or Italy. Recalling the earlier anti-Japanese messages, posters, films, comic books, popular songs, news articles, and other propaganda, which depicted Japanese people as foreign, grotesque and uncivilized. Often times, they were pictured as subhuman apes, insects, rats, or reptiles. American propagandists portrayed the Japanese as blindly fanatic and ruthless, with a history of desiring overseas conquest. Anti-Japanese messages applied to Japanese Americans as well as to enemy troops. Even Dr. Seuss used vicious racial stereotypes to depict Japanese Americans as dangerous pests and saboteurs in a series of political cartoons that he created for a New York newspaper. Such

images and rhetoric supported the government plans to remove and incarcerate thousands of Japanese Americans, and fomented vehement hatred of the Japanese that was not equally shared for German or Italian combatants.

Resistance to Removal and Incarceration

Some Japanese Americans evaded the forced removal by moving east of the exclusion zone or hiding their ethnic identity, but most had no options but to cooperate with Executive Order 9066. However, some *Nisei* sought to use their status as citizens to test the legality of the initial curfew or removal orders. Gordon Hirabayashi of Seattle refused to follow the initial imposition of curfew for all Japanese Americans. Then when required to register for "relocation," he refused and turned himself in to the FBI in order to test the government's right to incarcerate Japanese Americans without due process of law. In June 1942, Hirabayashi's lawyer went to court arguing that both the exclusion law and curfew were racially prejudiced and unconstitutional. But the judge ruled against him. His lawyers then appealed his case to the Supreme Court, which upheld his conviction in a unanimous ruling in *Hirabayashi v. United States*, on June 21, 1943.

Fred Korematsu lived in Oakland, California and was 22 when the U.S. declared war on Japan. His parents and three brothers reported to the Assembly Center, but Korematsu refused to comply with the exclusion order and was arrested in May 1942. The American Civil Liberties Union offered to represent him and Korematsu agreed to challenge the constitutionality of President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066. After the federal district court in San Francisco found him guilty of violating military orders, his case went to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1944. The high court upheld the lower court's ruling in a 6-3 vote.

Minoru Yasui was the first Japanese American to graduate from the University of Oregon's law school. Unable to find work as a lawyer, he took a position at the Japanese Consulate General of Chicago. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Yasui quit his consular job immediately and returned to the West Coast. He had been an ROTC cadet in college and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army Reserves after he graduated. He reported for duty at Fort Vancouver in Washington but was turned away on account of his Japanese ancestry. Back in Portland, he opened a law practice dedicated to helping the Japanese community, but he grew outraged at the injustices being imposed by the government. He decided to test the new travel restrictions and curfews imposed on Japanese Americans by walking through downtown Portland after 8 pm. Yasui was arrested and convicted of violating the curfew and after taking his case to the Supreme Court lost his appeal. He spent nine months in solitary confinement before being imprisoned in the Minidoka camp in Idaho.

Mitsuye Endo lost her job when California fired all Japanese Americans state employees after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. With the aid of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), Endo and sixty-two other employees sued the state of California to protest their termination. In the meantime, Endo was sent with her family to the Tule Lake, California, prison camp. With the case against the firings made moot by the removal and incarceration, the JACL recruited Endo to challenge the incarceration through a habeas corpus petition that was filed in July 1942, in federal district court in San Francisco. On December 18, 1944, the Supreme Court ruled in *Ex Parte Endo* that the federal government could no longer detain loyal American

citizens against their will. This landmark lawsuit ultimately led to the closing of the prison camps and the return of Japanese Americans to the West Coast in 1945.

Japanese Americans also resisted the degradation and demoralization of incarceration through many individual and group actions within the prison camps. Some organized unions and social clubs that represented them in negotiations with camp administrators. They demanded better food, the right to produce their own Japanese food such as soy sauce and mochi, improvements to the living barracks, and constructed their own rock and vegetable gardens. In 1943, many Japanese Americans used the loyalty questionnaire and the army recruitment as an opportunity to point out the violation of their civil liberties. Approximately 12,000 answered “no” to the two loyalty questions and were labeled as “disloyal” and segregated at Tule Lake camp where they suffered even greater restrictions and harsher treatment. Nearly 300 incarcerated Japanese American men refused to register for the draft after it was imposed in 1943, claiming that the government had deprived them of their citizenship rights when they and their families had been imprisoned. Draft resisters were charged with a federal crime and most served terms of three years in federal penitentiaries.

Life in the Prison Camps

Executive Order 9066 stripped Japanese Americans of many rights and authorized their relocation, first to assembly centers and then inland to a system of prison camps in California, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, Arizona and as far away as Arkansas. For members of this community, the initial news of Executive Order 9066 and the forced removal from their homes caused shock, fear, and anxiety about their future. The stress of forced dislocation and the loss of their homes, possessions, and businesses was coupled with a lack of information about where they would be taken, what the government would do to them, how they would be detained, and what they could hope for in the future. In addition, facing discrimination and harassment, losing all civil rights, and being labeled as disloyal despite years of building their lives and communities as Americans caused extreme pain for many Japanese Americans.

Officially termed “relocation centers,” the desolate encampments were essentially prisons. Incarcerated Japanese were held behind barbed wires, under the watchful eyes of guards and unable to come and go at will. Daily life in the camps was harsh and dehumanizing with overcrowding in poorly constructed barracks, inadequate sanitation and medical resources, poor food, insufficient privacy, and inadequate schools. For the duration of the war, Japanese Americans were treated as prisoners in their homeland, often at the mercy of white administrators and government policies determined by expediency. In many families, the communal living and eating arrangements strained parental authority and family ties, with young people eating and socializing more on their own than before the war.

The negative consequences of incarceration continued long after the camps began closing in 1945. Japanese Americans were released from the camps with a bus ticket and $25. Most returned to the West Coast but in many cases their homes had been seized by neighbors or lost because they could not keep up with their property taxes. Some Japanese Americans formed organizations to help the community find housing and employment and ease the transition. But many of the *Issei* were too old to restart their careers or businesses and became dependent on

their children. The *Nisei* lost valuable years preparing for careers and many lost confidence in the American dream of working hard to achieve a better life for one's family. Almost all felt like second-class citizens. Many families carried a sense of shame for being imprisoned and were reluctant to speak about it publicly or even with children and grandchildren.

Throughout this time of hardship, the Japanese American community demonstrated its resilience and strength. Incarcerees created gardens, built furniture, organized classes and events to support Japanese arts and culture as well as athletics, and civic engagement. For some women, life in the camps lessened their family obligations and they gained satisfaction through working, socializing with other women, or taking classes. The gross violation of civil rights and extreme discrimination the Japanese Americans faced encouraged many to become more sensitive to issues of social justice and a willingness to mobilize to redress injustices.

The Redress Movement

A movement to redress the injustice of wartime incarceration and to obtain full restitution of civil rights, an apology, and reparations began shortly after the war. The JACL lobbied for the 1948 Evacuation Claims Act that provided minimal compensation for loss of property, the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act giving *Issei* the right to become naturalized citizens, and the repeal of state laws denying *Issei* the right to own land. Community activism increased in the 1960s and 1970s resulting in the official rescission of Executive Order 9066 in 1976. In 1980, Japanese American lobbying and organizing led Congress to create a bipartisan Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC). The Commission convened 20 days of hearings at which more than 500 former detainees testified. Their accounts of pain and suffering galvanized redress support from Japanese Americans. The JACL leaders and members, along with a wide range of organizations and individuals urged the Commission to recommend that Congress provide an apology and compensation of $25,000 to each person who suffered incarceration. In its 1983 report, the Commission acknowledged the injustice of mass detention and concluded these policies were caused not by "military necessity" but by "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership." The Commission recommended that Congress and the President issue a national apology, establish a foundation to educate the public, and provide $20,000 to each surviving detainee. In 1987, Congress finally passed legislation granting the Commission's recommendations. In addition, Gordon Hirabayashi, Minoru Yasui, Fred Korematsu, and a legal team of third generation Japanese American lawyers successfully nullified the wartime convictions on the basis of newly discovered evidence that the U.S. military lied to the Supreme Court in the original proceedings.

Since 1969, Japanese Americans who were formerly incarcerated, their families, friends, and other activists have turned many of the World War II Japanese American prison camps into sites of conscience where they can gather to remember and honor the past, and to educate the public about this chapter in U.S. history. This grassroots movement inspired annual walks of remembrance, national historic sites, museums, commemorative exhibitions, and memorials across eleven states. More than fifty sites, including assembly centers, prison camps, and prisoner isolation centers, are now preserved and opened to the public in order to teach about the injustices of World War II incarceration and inspire a commitment to equal justice under the law.