SANSEI VOICES: INTERVIEWS WITH THREE CHILDREN OF JAPANESE-AMERICAN CONCENTRATION CAMP SURVIVORS

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The impact of the wartime internment for Japanese-Americans was brutal and traumatic. Nearly 120,000 people, all civilians, were evacuated from their homes and communities, stripped of their livelihoods, and detained in relocation (concentration) camps following the issuance of Executive Order 9066 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The majority of these people, although stigmatized as "enemy aliens", were American citizens. Ironically, no person of Japanese ancestry living in the United States was ever charged with espionage or sabotage.

This, one of the most shameful chapters of American history, and an indication of the depth of the racism of this society, has never been included in conventional historical accounts. Even more ironically, after the Second World War, the stereotypes of Japanese-Americans did an almost complete about face--undoubtedly the product of the nation's desire to forget that relocation and internment had ever taken place. Instead of being cursed as the "yellow peril" and a people "unfit for the human race"[1], Japanese-Americans had become "America's model minority"--good American citizens "better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites."[2] This new view of Japanese-Americans barely masked another, more devious kind of racism, but it also reflected the reality that many had been forced to desperately embrace Americanization in an effort to both obliterate the experience of the camps and to minimize the cultural differences that set them apart from white America and had made them so vulnerable to persecution and hysteria.

After listening to Yuri Kochiyama speak so movingly about her experience as an internee, I wondered what had been the

impact of the experience on the next generation of Japanese-Americans--the children of the survivors of the camps. These young people had come of age during a period of major social upheaval in the United States and a time of cultural and political awareness and pride among people of color that had its origins in the civil rights and Black power movements. How had this affected their views of their parents' experiences? What did it mean for their own lives and those of their children? How did they view assimilation and Americanization? In an effort to begin to answer some of these questions, I interviewed three Japanese-Americans, two women and one man, all in their late twenties. A.K. is a clerical worker, active in her union, and has one daughter. R.O. is an administrator in a progressive health clinic in Chinatown. W.T. is a social worker and has been a labor and community activist for some years. What follows are passages from these interviews, together with some of my own observations. I do not attempt to draw any major conclusions from these interviews, but merely to present a sampling of the thinking of some young Japanese-Americans today.

My interviewees first found out about the concentration camps at varied ages. Says A.K., "I think I've known about the camps my whole life. I don't remember when I first started hearing about it. When I was younger, though the camps were only talked about in a positive way; only the positive aspects were discussed, never the negative aspects. Some of those things were the cooperation between people, how people pulled together in a time of crisis, the endurance and the perserverance, how everyone really had to help each other. That was always highlighted. So, growing up as children, we weren't aware of the trauma, and the pain and the horror of it. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I really started hearing the true story of what happened. I must have been around fifteen years old at the time and that was in the environment of the civil rights movement, the Black power movement, and the Vietnam War. My emotional reaction was a lot of anger, hurt...when I found out about my mother's own experience--both my parents were in the camps and all of my relatives were in the camps, except for one grandfather who was in New York City at the time--the day Pearl Harbor was hit, their home was raided by the F.B.I. My grandfather was taken into custody, he was interrogated, and he died two weeks later. I felt like the United States government was responsible for his death. That was very traumatic for me, because I had never known about that, and that the man actually had died had a profound effect on the family. But...it also made me want to search back into my own history, my personal, family history,

and the history of our people, and that was a positive thing that came out of it. So, from that, I started to do more research, and Japanese-Americans started coming together and talking more and sharing experiences." W.T. became aware much later: "I don't remember having any awareness of it until probably around junior high school or high school, but I didn't really talk to them in depth about it until our Asian studies class in high school...I really found out about it because we had an assignment in class to interview our parents about it. Before that...my impression is that Nisei--the second generation--really don't talk about this very much; in fact, this was one of the things we found out in high school was that there wasn't any history books or anything like that and that the students themselves--the Japanese-American students--really didn't know much about it at all." R.O.'s awareness came about as a result of her growing awareness of the differences between herself and the people in her neighborhood: "I was about three or four years old. My parents had relocated from camps and come out to the east coast by way of Arizona and Jerome, Arkansas to Minneapolis, and my mom was working in D.C. for the Interior Department. So when I was about three, I guess I looked around and said to my folks, "how come there's nobody who looks like us in this neighborhood?"--my dad had settled in this white, middle-class suburb in Maryland to work as a scientist; he had decided pretty much not to return to California. When I was about three, I got into fights with kids about being a "Jap"--

they called me a Jap and I knew they weren't being very friendly about it so we used to get into fights. So, I guess between my third and fourth birthday sometime, I ran home and I asked my dad why were we here and why were there no other people like us around. So he explained to me what had happened. Of course, I was too young to really understand, but he sort of just told a very short story about how his family had been put in a camp and shipped around."

Their parents' reactions to questions about the experience ranged from resignation and matter-of-factness to longing for the lives they'd led before internment, and anger and amazement when they recalled what they had been through. R.O: "My mother was alwayeally very emotional about it. She was a test case. I think she was the last person to leave California. Although she didn't go to jail, she went to court and she was detained and so forth because she was challenging the constitutionality of it...so she had these transcripts sitting in her drawer, and she would pull them out when we became of reading age and she would read them to us. She was very...sad that she'd had to leave her home, and that her community was broken up and that her family was displaced. She really had a large family--ten uncles and my grandfather's really good friends and the church, and the whole community was just dispersed, never really to be reconstituted again. She would tell us a lot of stories very fondly about her growing up. So I felt really sad for her, and I also felt that I was cut off from that cultural,

well, center of life and activity. Although I was having fun and had a lot of friends. At the time there was racism against Asian people because of the Korean War, but I felt like this was the only thing I know, so if I felt badly about it, I felt badly for my parents. Then later on when I grew older, I started to wonder, "well, why didn't they fight back", or "why didn't they shoot the army", or sort of these irrational feelings of wanting to get even or to take revenge for having disrupted their lives." W.T. says that, "The reaction that I recall is that--you'd think that they'd be really upset or hold a grudge against the government--they were in the camps for three years, I think, and that's a long time, a big chunk of your life, and it was when he was in high school; he went through high school basically in the camps. But the way they talk about it, anyway, they really didn't see it as a big atrocity, they just saw it as an experience they went through. After a while, when it became an issue, an example of discrimination and mistreatment of Asians, then they began talking about it a little differently. But, I think initially, you never would have thought that it was as terrible as it actually was...I was sort of shocked, because, again, that was during the late sixties, so there was a lot of radicalism around, and it was always used as an example of one of the biggest atrocities committed against Asians. So of course, all of us thought it was one of the worst things that could have ever happened, which it actually was--a whole ethnic group being stuck in the camps. So I struggled with them a lot over how

to look at it. Coming from the standpoint of a young student in the sixties, I was pretty shocked that they wouldn't be more up in arms about it." W.T. went on to describe some of his parents' accounts: "One of the things they have talked to me about was the experience of losing everything. My father had an import-export business, and I'll tell you the story that my father told me about it because he was in the import-export business and travelled between Japan and San Francisco. My grandfather on my father's side grew up in America--he wasn't born in America, but he grew up in America--so he was very much aware of the way things go, on the American side, and he was more Japanese, so he knew it on the Japanese side, too. My father remembers hearing about World War 2, about the fact that there would be a conflict between America and Japan about a year or so before Pearl Harbor. He heard it from his father because he knew about the embargo and the political and economic goings-on of the time. So when he was fifteen or sixteen, sometime in the early years of high school, he recalls being under a lot of pressure or a lot of uncertainty about what was going to happen. He had sort of a constant fear of being Japanese and going to war against Japan. And his father actually had to talk to him quite a bit about this. He was living in San Francisco at the time and his father was out of the country, in Japan or on a ship just crossing over. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, his whole family really freaked out because they, I think, expected something to happen to them, and until his father got

back, they weren't sure if he was going to be still alive. That was a real traumatic experience for the whole family. He never talked to me too much about what he experienced in actually going to the camps--I'm not exactly sure what his family lost. Although, again, talking about the experience in the camp, it sounded fairly typical. They had a horse stable with one room, and there was five girls--five sisters--and him, and his mother and father. So you live in a horse stable for three years, I don't see how it could be anything but--you think about how the experience was and I really still wonder why aren't my parents just steaming pissed off about the whole thing. I mean, I guess it was probably a matter of survival. What else could they do? One of the sisters was born in the camps, so that whole thing must have been something. And he talks about the guards in the watchtowers pointing machine guns at him and everything like that. But again, I remember when he was talking and he was talking kind of matter of factly, sort of himself, I thind, amazed when he was recalling it again, but nothing that really brought on a real hatred response. When he goes over his old year books, he's on the football team and the baseball team, all this kind of stuff.

The story I recall most about my mother was that she did have some land. Her family had some farming land and her mother was an English teacher in a Japanese community, a rural community somewhere outside Sacramento. There it was, one day

they got a notice about being shipped off and they were just totally shocked. Unlike my father, they just had no awareness of it at all. So they had like, two days or something, to pack up all their stuff and gave most of it away to their neighbors, except the house, which they were supposed to have held on to, but I don't know what happened to it; they lost it somewhere in the process; and just had to stuff everything in suitcases and trunks, and she recalls waiting in line for the train with all the other Japanese people around, again, really not understanding what was going on. The one thing I remember her recalling was the only people she remembers helping them was the Quakers, so ever since then, she's had this big affirmation for the Quakers. Since she was from a rural area, she knew a lot of families that were completely wiped out. She does take more of a nationalistic view, I mean, really seeing the impact that it had on the Japanese people in America. Because agriculture in California was significantly Japanese-run. I'm not sure, but the way they talk about it, most of the major farmers were Japanese, and they were just completely wiped out. I think she was more conscious of the racism because she knew of people, other farmers, who were after that land, and they were really doing it for the economic power, which they pretty much got. There are a few Japanese farmers at this point, but it was pretty much wiped out."

How had experiences like these affected their parents, then young men and women, in terms of how they felt about their own cultural heritage, and their relationship to "American"

culture and values? According to W.T., "The effect it had on my parents was to forget the Japanese heritage somewhat and become more Americanized. To tell you the truth, of the relatives and friends that I knew, it had more of an impact like that. My father always talks of belonging to the Boy Scouts and all the athletic teams and things like that, and very little emphasis in our family was ever put on Japanese culture, except things like collking, or whatever heritage or habits my parents had that were unconsciously passed along. But we were never encouraged to maintain a Japanese culture...on the other hand, there was a fairly close-knit Japanese community. A lot of people knew each other, there were three or four churches that everybody went to, and a Japanese basketball team, different cultural events that happened all the time. But at the same time, that Japanese community was also more American, in comparison to, say, other ethnic groups. People all related together, they did things together, there were different Japanese activities and things like that--it all had a very Americanized thrust to it...and I know...there was a pretty big pressure in the camp experience to make your choice, and my impression of it is that most people really went out of their way to proclaim their patriotism to America, and very few--nobody that I knew, and none of my parents' friends that I know of--actually expressed any patriotism to Japan." A.K. commented on the silence of many Japanese-American parents about their experiences in the camps: "It was either (dealt with by parents of Japanese-

American friends of hers-D.E.) the same way that my family dealt with it, either highlighting only the positive things or not discussing it at all. It's a very Japanese kind of thing, a very common experience...I think the experience was so painful people wanted to put it behind them or bury it. There was a whole push to prove how American they were. Afterwards, they wanted to assimilate and they didn't want their children to go through what they went through...I think my parents weren't even conscious of it. I think if I asked them now, I think they'd be surprised that we went through so many changes where we did grow up feeling--when people would say "what are you?", I would say "I'm an American", and I already had that sense that it was important to point that out, that I wasn't a foreigner or an immigrant or an alien or something. It was important to say, "I'm an American." Now I say I'm Japanese or Japanese-American. It did have an effect in the sense that even though my parents didn't talk about the negative things, I was always aware of Pearl Harbor...everytime Pearl Harbor was mentioned, I'd go through changes, and movies, war movies, the Japanese were always the enemy. The word Jap had a very, very...it would hit something that was very deep and very sensitive, so there was that consciousness, but it was buried; we didn't quite understand it growing up. Because of that we also negated our Japanese-ness to a point where, I have an American first name and a Japanese middle name; my first name is Laurie. When I was younger, it was the biggest insult to call me Aichi because

it sounded Japanese, and my brothers would do that when they got mad at me. I never wanted to learn the language, we did not follow any of the traditions, Japanese traditions. There was a lot of negation of the culture. It's really a shame when I think about it, because now, later, I'm trying to catch up."

Although my interviewees spoke of the pressures that they experienced, especially during their childhoods, to be "American" and to negate their heritage, some of this began to be reversed as they approached young adulthood. The Black power movement, which had for Black people awakened a strong sense of pride in our African roots, also encouraged other people of color to accept themselves and to learn about and be proud of their own cultural heritages and histories of resistance to European domination. A.K. describes her experiences growing up as a teenager in New York City; "I grew up in a predominantly Black and Latin community, in the Amsterdam Projects in the sixties, and also in Harlem in the Manhattanville Projects. And I ran with people who were very involved in the movement, and more nationalist. I was only about fourteen or fifteen, but by that time, the family was involved and there was a lot happening. There was the whole movement of Black is beautiful, of going back, wearing African clothing, and it made me really have to reflect and ask myself, well, who am I, because I really didn't know. Until that time, I wasn't interested, I'd never thought about it. And it was a very positive

thing for me, because I had to, like, search back. I took on my Japanese name, which was an important thing for me to do, I even started wearing Japanese clothing, which is kind of weird, because I don't wear it now. I feel like I don't need to, that who you are--it's an internal thing, it doesn't matter what you wear or whatever. I went through that whole stage; I became more nationalistic, became more angry toward white people and towards the American structure, economic structure. I got a lot of support from my Black friends who were political to find out my history and my culture. So it was very important."

My final question to my interviewees was, after their adolescence and the initial shock, anger, and pain that they felt upon discovering the camp experience, how did they feel now as adults who have grown in both experience and perspective, and how would their experience impact on their own childrearing. R.O. replied, "From the time I was eleven, I think I became really aware that my self-identity would always put me marginal to everybody just because...I think I was looking at it in terms of the numbers game. If you're less than 01% of the population, you really don't count. But I think...I also spent some time with my family in Japan when I was growing up--my dad went to work there for the government--and we grew up in my teenage years and then I went back in college. I think I was always trying to deal with it, and also with some of the things that I studied

in histroy I tried to focus on that period and do research...so I think I was trying to come to terms politically with the status of Japanese and my particular place as a Japanese woman. I think the way I view it now is more--is probably less personal...I think that there's so many people who as a group have had to put up with so much unfairness and brutality which exceeds what happened to the Japanese...but I also feel like, well, you just can't trust the cultural hegemony that the WASP American culture has set up. It's always going to define you as something else, something other. So I guess that what I feel is just paranoid about American culture and that you never know when they're going to try and single you out and scapegoat you, especially if you have a competitive force in the marketplace...But as for politics, I think I feel like in the center of much of oppositional, left-wing kinds of politics just because of my status..."

W.T. says, "At this point, even now to me, it's like a historical type of thing. I mean, I don't really feel the impact of the camps as a regular thing. You think about it and you look at that time in history and you can't help but get pretty pissed off over the things that happened, and also wonder how it came to be and wonder about the response of my parents and how they reacted to it. When you think about it, you really do get pissed, you really are surprised that such an injustice--it really points up the fallacy of the Japanese-Americans as being the "model immigrant" or whatever they're supposed to be called, and the reason you get pissed is they call you this and everything, but

but on the other hand, they completely ignore the past, what they put you through. Maybe part of why I don't feel it that much is that I don't relate to the Japanese-American community now, but if I was still in the Bay Area or if I was in a Japanese-American community, I probably would."

A.K. felt very strongly about the importance of transmitting not only the experience, but Japanese-American culture as a whole to the younger generation: "It's very important to me how my daughter grows up, that she has that knowledge of who she is and what her roots are, what our history as a people has been. There's a lot to be proud of, of the struggle and strength. So we talk about it a lot and she knows about the camps and a lot about the history of America, Third World people and poor people in general. We discuss it all the time. Also, she studies Japanese classical dancing and karate, and we go to a lot of affairs where there's a lot of Asian people. So I think she already has that pride and that self-confidence that I didn't have when I was her age." W.T. has no children yet, but echoes her sentiment: "I would try to approach it more as a major part of your heritage. It's the kind of thing that should be more interviews and discussion with Niseis and Sanseis about; there should be more relating the experience of that time down from generation to generation. I think now probably it could happen more."

Conclusion

Two themes recur in these three voices. The first is the effect of the times; in other words how the historical moment enabled them, as young Japanese-Americans, to bring the camp experience to light and to express and articulate the anger that their parents initially could not. The second is a desire that the experience be kept alive, that it not be in vain, and that future generations will remember it, learn from it, and hold fast to the legacy of culture and resistance that has been handed down.