

Mr. Vice Chairman; other commissioners:

As members of a panel of mental health professionals we are happy to have this opportunity to testify before you this morning. My name is Amy Iwasaki Mass. I am a clinical social worker and have worked in this profession for twenty-three years. For the last twelve years I have been in private practice. My speciality has been working with Japanese Americans. I am also a member of the Social Work faculty at Whittier College.

I was six years old when the war broke out between the United States and Japan. I spent three years of my childhood in a concentration camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. Until I was in my mid-thirties, I did not think that camp was a bad experience. When people asked me how it was to be put away, I said it was fun for me. I was a child. I was with my parents. We played in the snow at Heart Mountain. My mother and I even got a day's pass to visit Yellowstone Park with a busload of other camp inmates. Camp was fun.

Several years ago, however, I went through a period of careful self examination and these carefree memories began to crumble. I started to remember the terror of the days following Pearl Harbor, when I was afraid the FBI were going to come to take my father. My uncle had been taken; many of my father's



friends were put in jail (the word "jail" made more sense to me at that time than the term "internment"). My best friend's mother, who was a Japanese school teacher, and her father who was a Buddhist priest, were taken away. My friend was sad and terrified. Since my father had been active in the Japanese community he had his bag packed and ready to go. I woke up each morning afraid that he was gone.

I remembered the scared feeling I had as we lined up to go into the buses to take us to the assembly centers. We all wore tags with numbers. Each family lined up with oldest member of the family at the head of the line, the youngest at the end. I was scared; I was the youngest and I wanted to be closer to my parents. My cousin threw up in the bus on the way to the Pomona Assembly Center. I know now that stomach upset is a way of reacting to stress and the insecurity and fear of abandonment.

I remembered the guard towers, the soldiers with their guns pointed in to us. Weren't they supposed to be protecting us from all the potentially dangerous, hostile people outside?

I remembered the hatred in the eyes of the man and woman who ran a restaurant in Butte, Montana. My mother and her friends tried to enter the restaurant during a train stop as we were on the return trip home from camp. The Issei ladies did not read the "no Japs allowed" sign in the window. By then I was ten. I could read, and I herded the ladies away from the restaurant.

I remembered feeling bad about being Japanese, of being



able to speak Japanese, of having Japanese parents. I felt ashamed because I loved my parents. I also loved America. I get goosebumps when I sing "The Star Spangled Banner." I believed what our teachers taught us about what a great country America is.

As a clinician in the field of mental health I tried to understand why so many Americans, Japanese and otherwise, were able to rationalize, justify, and deny the injustice and destructiveness of the whole event.

I have come to the realization we lulled ourselves into believing the propaganda of the 1940's so that we could maintain our idealized image of a benevolent, protective Uncle Sam. We were told we were being put away for our own safety. We were told this was a patriotic sacrifice necessary for national security. The pain, trauma, and stress of the incarceration experience was so overwhelming, we used the psychological defense mechanisms of repression, denial, and rationalization to keep us from facing the truth.

The truth was that the government we trusted, the country we loved, the nation to which we pledged loyalty, had betrayed us, had turned against us. Our natural human feelings of rage, fear, and helplessness were turned inward and buried. Experiencing and recognizing betrayal by a trusted source leads to a deep depression, a sense of shame, a sense of "there must be something wrong with me." We were ashamed and humiliated. It was too painful to see that the government was not helping us but was in fact against us. It



was more tempting and easier to believe the propaganda and rationalizations of the American government in order to defend ourselves against the truth. Rather than facing the truth that America was being racist and unfair, we wanted to believe that America did not hate and reject us.

This is the same psychological defense that beaten and abused children use. Abused children suffer from depression and shame. Mental health experts have found that abused children prefer to believe that they are bad rather than to believe that their parents are bad. Like the abused child who still wants his parent to love him, and who hopes that, by acting right, he will be accepted, the Japanese Americans chose the cooperative, obedient, quiet American façade to cope with an overtly hostile, racist America. By trying to prove we were 110% super-patriotic Americans we hoped to be accepted.

The problem is that acceptance by submission, exacts a high price. It is at the expense of the individual's sense of true self worth. Though we may be seen by others as model Americans, we have paid a tremendous psychological price for this acceptance. On the surface we do not look like former concentration camp victims, but we are still vulnerable. Our scars are deep and permanent. Just two weeks ago as I found the envelope from the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians in my mail, I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach as the thought flashed through my mind, "Oh no, a summons from the government."



The problem is still with us. Just two days ago as I observed these commission hearings in this same room, I sat near a group of Caucasian women who were obviously, for their own emotional reasons, against redress for Japanese Americans. I felt anxious and frightened as I realized that the kind of dedicated hatred these people felt toward us was the force that led us to spending so many years behind barbed wire.

Feelings such as hate, bigotry, fear, and humiliation prevent us from making wise and sane decisions about national policy that affects the lives of thousands. As I have observed the members of this commission, I have the impression that you are thoughtful, reasonable, humane men. It is my hope (for there is a part of me that still wants to trust my government) that each of you will use these qualities to make wise decisions so that this time our trust in the government will not be betrayed.

Thank you very much.