

Stigma of Japanese-American war internees in U.S. lingers

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Twenty years after the United States offered a national apology and reparations to Japanese-Americans for forcibly relocating them to internment camps during World War II, those who fought against the injustice still bear a stigma.

High school teacher Haruo Kawate, 61, thought he knew everything about his father until the recent discovery of an old leather trunk in a closet in his home in Mitaka, western Tokyo.

Inside were old diaries and photographs of his father that gave Kawate a look at a part of the man's life he had not known.

Kawate was aware that his father, Masao, who passed away 11 years ago, had been held in a U.S. internment camp. But he never imagined that he was sent to isolated prison camps for fighting against the legality of a questionnaire used for judging whether Japanese-Americans were loyal to the U.S.

Masao Kawate was one of the leaders of an opposition movement called the No-No Boys — a nickname given to those who refused to answer or answered no to questions 27 and 28 of the questionnaire.

Question 27 asked about Japanese-Americans' willingness to serve in the U.S. military, while question 28 asked if they were willing to swear unqualified allegiance to the U.S. and forswear allegiance to any other nation or authority.

The two questions were perceived as confusing by respondents, as many thought they were signing up for the draft by answering yes to question 27, Kawate said.

Question 28 implied that respondents, who were mostly American citizens, had already sworn allegiance to Emperor Hirohito, and many rejected the premise by answering no because they thought the question was a trap, he said.

Kawate decided to trace his father's footsteps and attended the Tule Lake Pilgrimage two years ago in California.



Uprooted: Masao Kawate (standing, at right) poses with fellow teachers of Tri-State High School at the Tule Lake camp internment in California on May 13, 1943, in this photo provided by his son, Haruo. KYODO PHOTO

"I can't imagine how these people survived the severe winter of Tule Lake in a house like this. It is nothing but abuse by the U.S. government," Kawate said of a wooden barracks roofed with tar paper, the same type of dwelling that had housed his father and other internees for about four years.

Masao Kawate was born June 2, 1913, in a suburb of Sacramento, Calif., the oldest son of a Japanese-American farmer, and graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with a degree in political science in 1940.

The time was not very friendly to Japanese-Americans or Japanese immigrants, especially in California, where most of the immigrants resided.

Labor and farm competition fed into general anti-Japanese sentiment manifested in such laws as the Immigration Act of 1924, which effectively ended Japanese immigration to the United States.

However, the real dark age for Japanese-Americans began on Dec. 7, 1941, when Japan carried out its surprise raid on Pearl Harbor.

During the war, more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were forced to relocate from their homes and businesses, according to the National Japanese American Memorial Foundation. Despite this injustice, more than 30,000 young Japanese-Americans volunteered for military service.

Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin Roosevelt on Feb. 19, 1942, authorized the relocation of people of Japanese ancestry from their residences to internment camps in the western U.S.

Their total property loss is estimated at \$1.3 billion and net income loss at \$2.7 billion at the value of the dollar in 1983, documents from the National Archives: Internment of Japanese Americans say.

According to Masao Kawate's diary, he was forced to relocate by bus on the morning of May 14, 1942, from Newcastle, Calif., to the Tule Lake camp with other internees.

Masao Kawate, who was a teacher at a public high school inside the camp, was sentenced by the camp authority for two months in an isolation facility for violating the War Relocation Authority's order on March 30, 1943, by refusing to answer the loyalty questionnaire. He was sent to a prison in Moab, Utah, then later to a prison in Leupp, Ariz.

Masao Kawate and others were held longer than the sentence without any legal procedures and he wrote a letter to a project director of the Tule Lake Relocation Center in California.

"All of us have already served the said sentences. However, none of us has received any word from you, neither of release from confinement, none of extension of the sentences. Therefore, we are asking you to give us definite statement as to our status," Masao Kawate wrote in the letter dated May 12, 1943.

Ironically, such harsh treatment was allowed because they were U.S. citizens. Had they been Japanese nationals, they would have been treated as prisoners of war who were protected by the Geneva Conventions, Kawate said.

Shortly after returning to Tule Lake, Masao Kawate wrote a petition letter to the Spanish Embassy in Washington. Spain was officially nonbelligerent during World War II, and the letter, dated Jan. 4, 1944, sought its help for his speedy repatriation. He received no reply.

Masao Kawate, who dropped his U.S. citizenship after the amendment of the U.S. citizenship law in July 1944, was repatriated to Japan and worked for an oil enterprise. He never set foot on U.S. soil again despite restoring his citizenship later in Japan.

The situation surrounding the No-No Boys started to change in 1988 when President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which provided a presidential apology and individual payments of \$20,000 to each surviving internee and a \$1.25 billion education fund, among other provisions.

Satsuki Ina, a professor emeritus at California State University, Sacramento, said that once the internment was clearly identified as an injustice, internees must have felt a deep sense of vindication and could finally speak the truth with support and encouragement from people like researchers and filmmakers.