NIKKEI

The Japanese Peruvian Community of Chicago

By Ryan Masaaki Yokota
For The North American Post

On a warm spring day last year, members of the Japanese Peruvian community filled the pews of the Church of Christ Presbyterian in Chicago, not for church services, but instead to see the screening of a film and to hear an update from the Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project.

With some speaking Spanish in whispered conversations, the seeming incongruity of their Japanese faces and Spanish accents spoke to the reality of a World War II process that had caused the rendition of roughly 2,264 Japanese Latin Americans from their countries of origin to be imprisoned into multiple Department of Justice internment camps in the U.S. Approximately 1,800 of these internees had originated from Peru, with many settling in Chicago in the early postwar period.

Art Shibayama, now living in San Jose, California, but who had spent almost two decades of the postwar period in Chicago, exemplifies this experience, and the difficulties faced by many who ended up in Chicago from Peru.

Born in Lima, Peru in 1930, Art was only thirteen years old when he, his parents, and siblings were forcibly brought to the U.S. in 1943. At the time that his father was caught by Peruvian authorities, his grandparents had already been rendered by Peruvian authorities to the U.S. in early 1942.

In the process of being sent to the U.S., family separation and uncertainty typified the feelings of many Japanese Peruvians.

"Through the 21 days it took to go from Callao, Peru through the Panama Canal into New Orleans, I never saw my mother or the rest of my siblings," Art related. "We knew we were coming to the U.S. but we didn't know where or what was going to happen."

The U.S. government, seeking to use Japanese Latin Americans for prisoner exchanges with Japan, pressured Latin American countries to cooperate with the rendition program. Racism, anti-immigrant hysteria, political opportunism, and unfounded fears that the Japanese would form a "fifth column" informed Peruvian government collusion. Art's grandparents were caught up in these negotiations, and would eventually be repatriated to Fukuoka.

As Art noted, "My grandparents were used in one of the exchanges. So after they left Peru, I never got to see them again. By the time I went to Japan, they had already passed away."

For some Japanese Latin Americans, the internment process would extend past the formal end of the war, due to the complex legal status they received upon being brought to the United States. Passports had been seized, and they had been classified as enemy aliens who lacked a proper entry procedure into the U.S. This meant that upon war's end, the U.S. government would consider them as illegal aliens, who would have to fight deportation hearings. The peculiarity of their legal status meant that many Japanese Latin Americans, as in the case of Art's family, had to continue residing at an internment camp in Crystal City, Texas.

"I was in camp for two and a half years, because we didn't get out until September 1946. This was because my dad still wanted to go back to Peru, and the Peruvian government wouldn't take us back, but we had no place to go, so we had to stay in camp."

Options in the postwar period were scarce and were complicated by the fact that internees needed a guarantor in order to be "paroled" from the camps. For many Japanese Peruvians, Seabrook Farms in New Jersey, one of the largest frozen food and packing plants in the country at the time, served as an economic guarantor that provided an opportunity to leave the camps, though conditions were often harsh and demanding.

As Art notes, "Seabrook was just like camp except we didn't have a fence around us or guards. When we went to Seabrook my mother was pregnant and my father had a hard time feeding a family of six kids so I had to get special permission to go to work. So I didn't go to school. And since I didn't speak English, I had a heck of a time communicating with other people, even Nisei, because the Nisei didn't speak Japanese."

Resettlement in Chicago

Seeking better options, many of the Japanese Peruvians would eventually try to secure jobs and security elsewhere, and one of the more promising locations was Chicago. Kichō Yoshiya would be one of the first Japanese Peruvians to leave for Chicago in December 1947, and in January 1948 he was joined by Kunio Takeshita, Saburō Ushida and Shūhei Katsurō. These early migrants would then help secure jobs for others, leading to many more families moving to Chicago.

"My friend had some people he knew from camp who went to Chicago," Art related, "So that's how we moved to Chicago. You know in those days a lot of people went to Chicago from camp. Instead of coming back to California, they came to Chicago because jobs were available in those days."

Art would move to Chicago in 1950, joining the roughly 20,000 Japanese Americans whose ranks had swollen in the immediate postwar period. His father started working at a dry cleaner business and later managed apartment buildings. Art started working at a carbon paper company in its warehouse and reached the manager level before being shocked by a letter he received in the mail.

"In 1952 I had a nice invitation to join the army. Can you believe that? I got a draft notice. Here I am an 'illegal alien,' I was fighting deportation with an enemy alien status associated with my name, and then they send me a draft notice. Because they were trying to deport me, I thought I'd better go, so I joined the army."

Art would eventually be sent to Europe and serve as a typist for a medical branch of the military. Due to the need to get clearance to handle secret documents, the warrant officer on duty tried to resolve Art's issues with the immigration office but was unable to do so. Later, while in Chicago, changes in the immigration laws enabled him to get his green card by a maneuver that involved him temporarily leaving the country in order to get an official legal entry status.

Members of the Japanese Peruvian community of Chicago and their friends and family at a Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project event on April 25, 2015.

In Chicago, Art would find work as an auto mechanic at the Kawell-Walker Ford dealership on Chicago Avenue, a shop that was sympathetic to Nisei workers, hiring Nisei as eight of the ten mechanics working there. Later, he worked at the Hoskin Chevrolet dealership on Irving Park and Damen, which he stayed in their move to Elk Grove Village in 1968. Two years later, Art would move to California, where he remains today, though his two brothers continue to live in Chicago.

On January 27, 1968, the Japanese Peruvian community in Chicago reached a new level of organization with the founding of the Chicago Peru-kai in Wilson Village by Kuniyoshi Matsuda, Kunio Takeshita and Seiichi Higashide. Elections for leadership positions were to follow roughly one month later. According to Seiichi Higashide, the goal of the Peru-kai was to transmit the story of wartime internment to their kids and grandkids, and the club was borne out of a wish to build linkages for the next generation.

Primarily a social club, Art recaled that "every other year we used to have a reunion and we went to different places like Las Vegas." This organization continued to exist for several years it would eventually dissolve, though loose networks continue to remain. Meanwhile, the Japanese Peruvian community has grown to welcome newer migrants who came to the United States in the postwar period.

Japanese Latin American Redress Efforts

Members of the Japanese Latin American community were part of the groundswell of community activists that pushed for redress from the U.S. government and which became particularly active in the 1970s and early 1980s. Community members such as C. Harvey Gardiner, Seiichi Higashide, Eigo Kudo, Elsa Kudo and George Fujii would testify on behalf of Japanese Peruvian redress at the September 22, 1981 Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians hearings in Chicago.

The 1988 Civil Liberties Act, which issued a formal apology and $20,000 in reparations to living Japanese American former internees, raised hopes that the U.S. government would at last acknowledge the wrongs of the wartime period. Japanese Latin American expectations were dashed, however, when they would be excluded from the settlement on the basis of their "illegal alien" status at the time of internment.

Lobbying efforts in 1993 and 1994 to Washington D.C. seeking inclusion of Japanese Latin Americans in the redress bill would eventually come to naught, and activists like Grace Shimizu, daughter of a Japanese Peruvian former internee, would help spearhead the Campaign for Justice, formed in 1996 to obtain redress and an apology for Japanese Latin Americans. The Mochizuki vs U.S. lawsuit that was at the center of the Japanese Latin Americans' campaign resulted in a controversial out of court settlement which included an apology and only $5,000 in restitution to living Japanese Latin American former internees.

And yet for some Japanese Latin Americans like Art, the inequity in this redress settlement was particularly galling.

"The apology letter that my wife received has the White House stamp on it and the letter looks legal," Art said, in referring to the redress his Japanese American wife had received. "And yet the Clinton-signed letters for the Peruvians don't even have the stamp on that. So it just looks plain, like it could be anybody's letter."

Stung by the fact that theredress provided to Japanese Latin Americans diminished their suffering in comparison with the Japanese American community, Art, his two brothers and fourteen other Japanese Latin Americans filed suit in the U.S. District Court seeking equality in reparations, though the case was dismissed in 2002. Art's lawyers have continued to pursue legal action with a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to hold the U.S. government accountable for failing to provide redress for war crimes and for crimes against humanity perpetuated against their families, though a decision on this case has remained pending for the last thirteen years.

Even beyond the goal of achieving equitable redress for Japanese Latin Americans, Art continues to speak out about the injustice of the internment process and the need to keep the lessons of this history alive.

In referring to the wartime internment of Japanese Latin Americans, Art's message for future generations remains clear.

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"Something like this shouldn't happen. If something like this happens to you, you have to fight it, not just stay quiet and let people do whatever they want, like putting us in camp like that. You have to speak up."

* * * * *

Update from the Campaign for Justice:

Time is of the essence to secure proper acknowledgment and redress from the U.S. government and to document and preserve the family stories of the Japanese Latin Americans and the history of this wartime experience.

The redress struggle continues as we press the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to give expedited treatment to the Shibayama petition due to the age and health of the petitioners. We want the IACHR to make a positive ruling in favor of the Shibayama brothers by 2017.

The Uncovering Hidden History: The WWII Internment of JLAs Digital Museum Project will showcase oral histories, photos, documents and research to make the Japanese Latin American wartime and redress experience accessible online to anyone around the world in three languages (English, Spanish and Japanese). The interactive digital museum will be complemented by a nationwide discussion program to foster dialogue and draw lessons from this past to better meet challenges to our civil and human rights in the present.

Please contact jlacampaign@gmail.com for more information.

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Notes: Names are listed in the U.S. style, with first names preceding family names.

[*Editor's Note*]
This article was originally published in Discover Nikkei at <www.discovernikkei.org>, which is managed by Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. Ryan Masaaki Yokota is a Yonsei/Shin-Nisei Nikkei who originally hails from Southern California. Currently he is a Ph.D. Candidate in Japanese History at the University of Chicago, and had previously received his M.A. in Asian American Studies at UCLA. His great-grandfather was incarcerated in the Japanese American Concentration Camp at Rohwer, Arkansas during World War II. Additionally, his grandparents and father survived the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima.

Tough Tofu With Deems

George and Mitsuo

By Deems Tsutakawa
For The North American Post

My wife's auntie Lily --who, as of this writing, is still with us had a brother-in-law named George--Ogishima.

George was one of the many Japanese Americans who were stranded in Japan when World War II started. He ended up staying in Japan after the war to marry and raise a family. When Jean and I visited Tokyo in the 1980s, George picked us up at our hotel and drove us to the best Unagi Restaurant in the city.

It was very impressive in that I would never drive a car in Japan, and George was quite elderly at the time. We were so honored and fortunate to have that meal, and I'll always remember it.

One year when they were visiting the United States, we had Lily, George and his son Mitsuo over for dinner, and it was also a memorable night. Mitsuo was the reigning All Japan 9 Ball Champion and he won every game of pool we played that night. It wasn't even close, but it was a good pool lesson. If he did not run the table, he left me without any possible shot, and this is in my own house.

George had some interesting stories about his life. At some point during World War II, the Japanese Government found out that he was an expert Ham Radio operator. They ordered him to string a wire along 1 ½ miles of the Pacific Coast of Japan for use as a radio antennae.

The Japanese Army wanted to see if he could pick up American radio stations to study and gather information. To his amazement, the wire radio antennae was a success as he could clearly hear the Seattle stations KOMO and KIRO of his youth.

Bear in mind that these AM stations are out of reach right down the road in Portland, but he managed to receive their signals some 5,000 miles away with technology of the 1940s.

[Editor's Note]
Deems Tsutakawa is a local Sansei musician. He can be reached at deemst@deemsmusic.com.

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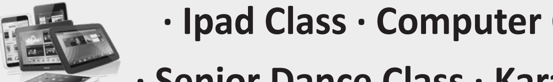

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