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Resistance to Syrian Refugees Calls to Mind Painful Past for Japanese-Americans

Hoping Not to Repeat the Past

CreditMark Makela for The New York Times

Before the attack that changed the country, a group of girls would meet their 14-year-old friend, Yuka, at her house every morning. They would walk to school together and discuss their plans for the day.

But the morning after the bombs were dropped and people lost their lives, Yuka waited and waited. Her mother urged her to go to school on her own. No, Yuka insisted, they'll be here.

They never came.

So she went to school by herself, only to discover that classmates she had considered close friends were suddenly ignoring her.

It was Dec. 8, 1941. The day after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. A Monday.

This week, Yuka Yasui Fujikura, who was born in Oregon to Japanese parents, reflected on the backlash against Syrian refugees after the recent terrorist attacks in Paris. And her thoughts drifted back to one of her country's most shameful chapters: when the American government indiscriminately criminalized tens of thousands of people of Japanese descent — most of them born in the United States — and forced them into detention centers during World War II.

Yuka Fujikura and her brother Homer Yasui recently. During World War II, they were sent to one of the biggest internment camps in Tule Lake, Calif. Credit Zach Gibson/The New York Times

“To judge someone by ethnicity or their religion,” said Ms. Fujikura, now 88, “it was wrong then, it’s wrong today, too.”

The dark memories of seven decades ago have bubbled to the surface in recent weeks for many other people who were sent to Japanese internment camps.

Since gunmen and suicide bombers with the Islamic State killed 130 people in Paris, there has been an outcry in some quarters to stop Syrian refugees from coming into the country. More than two dozen Republican governors have said they do not want Syrians escaping that country’s civil war to enter their states, fearing that terrorists would hide among them. Public officials have floated ideas that include surveillance of mosques, registering Muslims and setting up refugee camps.

What really disturbed Japanese-Americans was when the mayor of Roanoke, Va., David Bowers, a Democrat, suggested that barring Syrian refugees was prudent in light of the Japanese internment. “It appears that the threat of harm to America from ISIS now is just as real and serious as that from our enemies then,” he said. He has since apologized.

For Japanese-Americans of that era, it was a reminder of the days when the government forcibly removed them and their families from their farms, boarded up their businesses, put them on trains with the blinds drawn and shuttled them to remote prisons where they were held behind barbed wire, under the watch of armed guards.

It was a time, several said, when the news media propagated fear by reporting conspiratorial rumors — such as that Japanese farmers were plowing their fields in a certain manner to send messages to the enemy.

“Such blatant lies started to turn the tide against us,” recalled George Ikeda, 93, a California native who was sent to an internment camp on Independence Day in 1942.

By order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, about 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast, most of them born in the United States, were detained without charges during World War II. People shouted slurs at them. They were forced to fill out questionnaires to test their loyalty to the United States. The government set a curfew for people of certain foreign ancestries, but it was mostly enforced against the Japanese because they looked different.

Laurie Yasui receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom on behalf of her deceased father, Minoru Yasui, during a ceremony at the White House on Tuesday. Credit Zach Gibson/The New York Times

Out of that discrimination emerged leaders like Ms. Fujikura's brother, Minoru Yasui, who purposely had himself arrested to challenge the curfew. His conviction was eventually vacated. Though Mr. Yasui died in 1986 and the United States Supreme Court has never ruled on the constitutionality of the law he was fighting, his efforts received the ultimate honor on Tuesday when President Obama posthumously awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

"It makes me so proud that my grandfather is getting a Presidential Medal of Freedom for defying a presidential order," said Chani Hawkins, a granddaughter of Mr. Yasui's. "That gives me hope." With the debate over Syrian refugees coinciding with Mr. Yasui's honor, it was a prime opportunity to address the equality he fought for, another granddaughter, Serena Hawkins-Schletzbaum, said. "I don't know if it would have been heard as loudly if we weren't in this exact moment in time."

Ms. Fujikura's father was among Japanese citizens detained by the authorities after the Pearl Harbor attack, with law enforcement saying "he's a potentially dangerous enemy alien," Ms. Fujikura recalled.

He came to the United States nearly four decades earlier, she said, settling in Hood River, Ore. The family owned land and orchards, she said, and her father also co-owned a general store with his brother. Ms. Fujikura recalled a sign that was placed on the door of the store: "Alien property closed for business."

Ms. Fujikura, the youngest of nine children, said she was taken with her mother and another brother to a holding area in Pinedale, Calif., before being shipped off to one of the biggest internment camps in Tule Lake, Calif.

"When you're 14 years old and somebody says, 'Oh you're going to be shipped to a camp,' in my head I had envisioned something like a Campfire or Girl Scout camp," Ms. Fujikura said.

But she quickly learned it was not like that.

A Return to the Internment Camp

In an interview from May, Bob Fuchigami remembers the Amache internment camp in Colorado, where he was sent when he was 12 years old.

By Mike Shum and Colin Archdeacon on Publish Date May 17, 2015. Watch in Times Video »

Several people said they recalled being held on fairgrounds in smelly animal stables before being sent to permanent camps. Some remembered sweltering temperatures in their barracks. At Tule Lake, Ms. Fujikura said, she lived in a tar paper dwelling, and the walls between the units did not

go all the way to the ceiling, so everyone could hear what was going on in the neighboring dwellings. The communal toilets and showers did not have doors.

By the time the last camp was closed in 1946, many families had lost their homes, land and all their belongings. They were generally discouraged from returning to the West Coast, so many settled elsewhere. Tensions surrounding Japanese-Americans remained high.

Ms. Fujikura said that she was accepted at the University of Oregon, but that the university sent her a letter warning she could “return at her own risk,” she said.

The camps left lingering anguish for some. Marielle Tsukamoto, 78, who lives in suburban Sacramento and was interned with her family for about two years, recalled the complete darkness of the camps at night, but for the occasional spotlight check. She had a hard time getting over her fear of darkness, she said, even after adulthood.

When one of her cousins, a star basketball player, returned to high school for his senior year after internment, teachers and students no longer looked him in the eyes, smiled at or acknowledged him, Ms. Tsukamoto said.

She does not want the United States to ever make the same mistake again, she said.

In 1952, internment camp survivors successfully lobbied Congress to allow people from Japan to become naturalized citizens. Ms. Tsukamoto was among many who fought for greater redress. The result was a congressional commission convened in 1980 that concluded that the mass incarceration was not done out of national security, but out of “race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership.”

And they won their biggest victory in 1988 when Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act, requiring an apology and payments of \$20,000 each to survivors. In all, the government paid about \$1.6 billion to internment camp survivors.

“We thought that would prevent it from happening to another group in the future,” Ms. Tsukamoto said.

Mr. Yasui’s family noted that the Supreme Court’s 1944 ruling in *Korematsu v. United States*, which endorsed the executive order requiring Japanese detention, has never been formally overruled. And there is great concern among some Japanese-Americans that the sentiment regarding Syrian refugees has the country headed down a grimly familiar path.

“It’s people reacting in hysteria because of fear,” Ms. Tsukamoto said. “We’re better than that. This is a country that is based on welcoming immigrants.”

Peter Baker contributed reporting, and Jack Begg contributed research.

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