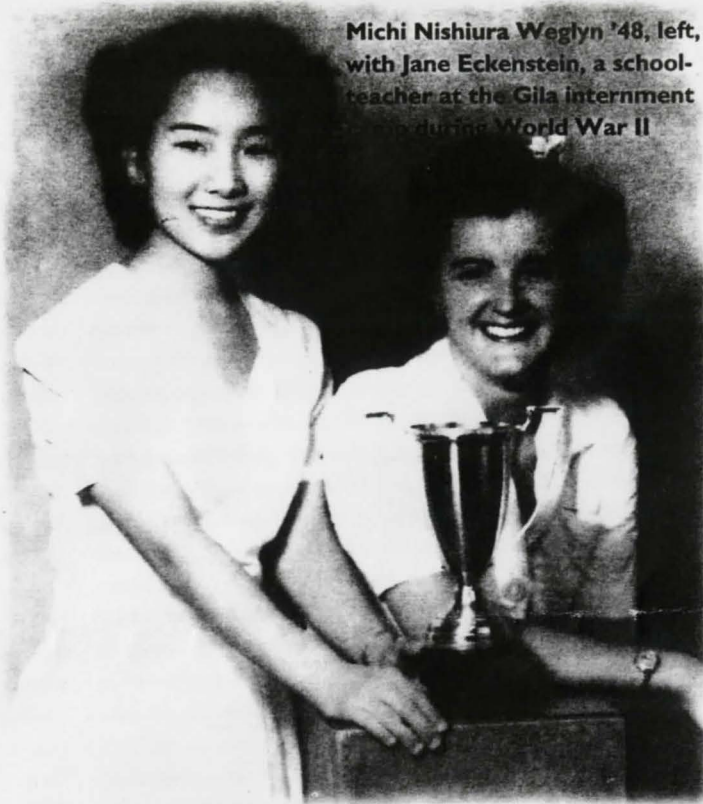


Michi Nishiura Weglyn '48, left, with Jane Eckenstein, a school-teacher at the Gila internment camp during World War II



Jen Dike Studio

and Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy; Colonel Karl Bendetsen, who created the legal justification for the camps; California Governor Earl Warren, an avid supporter of the camps; and Raymond Best, the bigoted administrator of the Tule Lake Camp.

Finally, Weglyn captures the human story of the people whose lives were totally disrupted by years of internment and by the stigma of guilt and disloyalty that was placed on them. "I wanted to enable the people who went through this to say, 'I'm not guilty!'"

Weglyn's book has been credited with galvanizing the campaign that led to the signing of a presidential redress bill in 1988. More than 80,000 Japanese Americans interned during the war have received reparations under the federal government's Civil Liberties Act—\$20,000 in compensation and an apology from the US president—but 3,000 more who are entitled have not been located.

TINY, WITH HER BLACK HAIR coiffed in an elegant upsweep, Weglyn seems an unlikely woman warrior. Sipping tea in her East Side apartment in Manhattan, surrounded by intricate rosewood tables and delicate Japanese

SHOW ME THE DOCUMENTS!" That's what Michi Nishiura Weglyn '48 has been demanding for thirty years in her crusade to expose the truth about what happened to Japanese Americans during World War II. Her award-winning book *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps*, first published in 1976 and recently reissued with updated information, does what previous books on internments during the wave of anti-Japanese paranoia in this country have failed to do.

It reveals the wartime repression of Japanese Americans for what it really was—an unconstitutional abuse of government power and a shameful mistreatment of a group of loyal and productive immigrants by their adopted country. It exposes the findings of a secret State Department report, issued before the camps were set up, that concluded there was no disloyalty problem or security threat from Japanese Americans. In it, Weglyn shares her discovery that the internees were being held not for reasons of national security but at least partly to serve as hostages in negotiations to free Americans who were being held as POWs by Japan. She also applies the term "concentration camp" to the internment camps, making a

clear analogy to the holocaust in Europe.

"[The book] was a clear act of vengeance," Weglyn declares. "I wanted to be able to throw the blame that had been placed on us as a people back at those responsible for the atrocities."

Years of Infamy discusses the barbed-wire stockade at Tule Lake where 18,000 supposedly high-risk prisoners—including children—were held in conditions similar to those in German prison camps. Weglyn names names of prominent government officials responsible for the internment program. Among them are President Franklin Roosevelt, who signed the executive order calling for the mass detention of Japanese Americans; Secretary of War Henry Stimson

EXPOSED: America's World War II Concentration Camps

Sheryl Y. McCarthy '69

paintings, she shared the story behind her quest for the truth.

When she was fifteen, Weglyn's family was interned. Her father and mother, longtime émigrés from Japan, had helped run a farm in rural Brentwood, California, outside San Francisco, for the owner. The Nishiura family, including Michi, her younger sister and mother, worked on the farm. When the sweeping internment order came down in early 1942, her family had two weeks to dispose of their possessions before being transported by bus to a processing center sixty miles away. From there they were shipped by train to a camp on the Gila Indian Reservation in Arizona where they remained for the duration of the war. None of their property was recovered.

Gila housed 14,000 internees and was "hot as hell." Whole families were crammed into one-room "apartments." For three and a half years and sixteen dollars a month her father did stoop work on a local farm and her mother worked in the camp mess hall. Weglyn was allowed out of the camp only twice in two years.

Ironically, however, for Weglyn the camp was in some ways liberating. Freed from farm labor, she attended the camp school, made friends and was sheltered from the violent anti-Japanese feelings that were exploding outside the camps. In 1944 a full scholarship from Mount Holyoke rescued her from the Gila camp. The one year she spent in South Hadley she remembers as "bittersweet." After winning a prize for a set design she created for a College production—which opened her mind to a career in the theatre—she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Leaving Mount Holyoke, she had to spend several years in sanitariums.

Later in New York City, Weglyn studied fashion design and made a splash with her costumes for an opening at the old Roxy Theater. She also met her husband Walter Weglyn, a perfumer and survivor of the holocaust. Over fourteen years she became a well-known costume designer, retiring in 1966 as designer for the *Perry Como Show*.

At her husband's urging, Weglyn began researching her book in 1967. Untrained as a historian, she was guided by her own passion to share the experience. She spent eight years digging in the New York Public Library, the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, the National Archives and at UCLA

and Berkeley, both repositories of extensive records about the camps. Eventually, the sordid truth dawned on her like the blazing Arizona mornings she remembered in the Gila camp: "My God, they were lying to us!" Weglyn attests.

REISSUED LAST YEAR with an introduction by James Michener, *Years of Infamy* was written during the Vietnam war, a time of widespread criticism of government policies abroad and when some black civil rights activists were suggesting that the government had plans to intern African Americans just as it had done with Japanese Americans in the 1940s. Asked to respond to recent demands by blacks for an apology from President Clinton for the suffering they endured during slavery, Weglyn says an apology is "positively" appropriate. The question of reparations for slavery, she thinks, is a harder issue. "There are so many blacks, and it's been so long. There's such an interracial mixture." A financial settlement such as the one to which Japanese-American internees are entitled, she believes, would be very difficult to structure.

At age seventy, Weglyn, who was widowed two years ago, is trying to tie up loose ends of the search that has dominated almost half of her life. These days she spends a fair amount of time searching through archives and prevailing upon the guardians of government papers to supply her with evidence of the federal government's complicity—along with owners of the nation's railroads—in the wholesale firings of Japanese-American railroad workers. She estimates

Weglyn, as Hunter College commencement speaker, 1992. She received an honorary degree from Mount Holyoke in 1994.



that 190 former workers for the Union Pacific and hundreds more who worked for other railroads could receive reparations if Congress or the President or the courts decide that the law applies to them as well.

Documents she is using to help prove her case include a telegram from former FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover to D.M. Jeffers, then president of the Union Pacific Railroad. In it Hoover says that Attorney General Francis Biddle assured him he would contact Jeffers about "the matter we discussed." There's also a letter from Jeffers to Colonel W.T. Bals of US military intelligence announcing his intention to fire all of his Japanese workers and indicating that neither Hoover nor Biddle had any objections.

At the very least, Weglyn says, the letters prove there was collusion between the government and the Union Pacific. "The question is, will the government accept the Union Pacific firings as proof of my theory; that is, after the Union Pacific got permission from the Attorney General and Hoover...the other western railroads fell in line." If so, then the railroad workers may take their place alongside the 120,000 Japanese Americans who were interned in the western states following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Weglyn believes that like the internees, the former railroad workers also deserve compensation for their firings.

"In the camps," Weglyn remembers, "we were at least provided with food, medical attention, a roof, school and work. But the railroad workers had to roam around like homeless people in a hate-filled America. Their children are entitled to redress." And it is crucial that they establish their claims soon because the deadline to apply for reparations under the law is only two years away.

As Weglyn presses her quest for full reparations, she has been transformed from "an innocent to an exhausted activist." She tries to place herself in the shoes of Arabs, Chicanos, blacks and other groups whenever they are publicly blasphemed in the way her group was after Pearl Harbor.

"[Such statements] are like a dagger through the heart," she asserts. "I think of the millions of daggers [plunged] through millions of hearts."

Sheryl McCarthy, author of 'Why Are the Heroes Always White?' and 'Niemann Fellow at Harvard' (1995-96), is a columnist for Newsday.

Corky Lee