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259 So. Los Angeles Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012

Phone: (213) 629-2231

Fax: (213) 687-

OBITUARY

Michi Weglyn Was Noted Activist

Who Wrote Redress 'Bible'

Her book, "Years of Infamy," inspired the Nikkei community into action to demand reparations for violations of their civil liberties during WWII.

By TAKESHI NAKAYAMA
RAFU ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Noted author, researcher and redress activist Michi Nishiura Weglyn, whose landmark book, "Years of Infamy," galvanized the Japanese American community into action to demand repara-

tions for violations of their civil liberties by the U.S. government during World War II, died Sunday, April 25, in New York after a long illness. She was 72.

A Central Valley farm girl, Weglyn was born in 1926 in Stockton to Tomojiro and Hisao Yuwasa Nishiura. As a teenager, she was placed in a camp for persons of Japanese descent at Gila River, Ariz., during World War II.

With help from the Quakers and concerned educators, she was able to leave the Arizona "relocation center" to attend Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, where she was offered a full scholarship. However, because of illness, she was forced to drop out.

Moving to New York City in the late 1940s to launch her career as a costume designer for television and Broadway, she met Walter Weglyn, a Jewish refugee from the Netherlands. They married in 1950.

"Walter was one of the few Jewish children from his hometown to survive the Nazi holocaust, so he well understood the importance of supporting Michi as she documented the history of her own internment," said Weglyn's long-time friend Philip Tajitsu Nash.

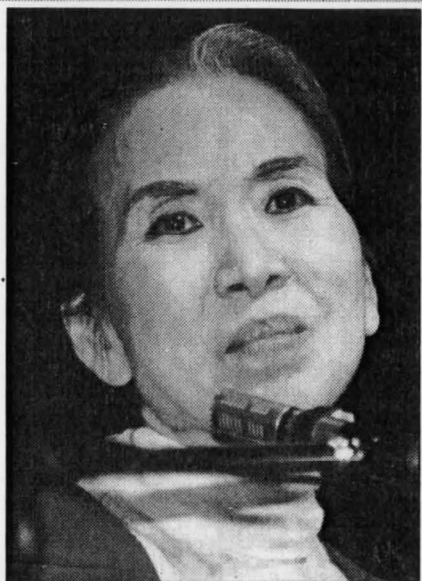
As one of 120,000 Nikkei who were forcibly removed from their West Coast homes and incarcerated in wartime U.S. concentration camps, Weglyn had a particular interest in discovering the details behind the internment. Her book, a thoroughly researched account of the internment years from the perspective of an American internee of Japanese ancestry, is credited with inspiring Japanese Americans to seek reparations from the United States government.

Weglyn disclosed, in a 1993 interview, she was motivated to write the book when, during the civil rights campaign of the 1960s, Attorney General Ramsey Clark stated that "we have never had, do not now have and will not ever have concentration camps here."

Former internee Weglyn recalled, "I thought that was an outright lie. I was a retired costume designer in New York, and I decided they were not going to get away with that. That was the catalyst for my book."

The book took eight years of painstaking research, with Weglyn relying on the secret files from the FDR Library, the National Archives and other materials to uncover the history and depth of the U.S. policy toward American residents of Japanese descent. Her book came out in 1975.

After a 10-year battle, Japanese Americans succeeded in convincing Congress to pass the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which authorized an apology and the payment of



MARIO G. REYES/Rafu Shimpo

Michi Weglyn

Weglyn

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had been interned or whose rights had been violated during World War II.

More importantly, said Weglyn at the time, the law "restored honor" to the Japanese Americans. Her groundbreaking account of the dark episode in U.S. history is regarded as "the bible of the redress movement."

Almost up to her last days, Weglyn continued to advise groups seeking redress and spoke out against the injustices perpetrated against those who had been denied reparations—the Japanese Latin American abductee/internees, railroad and mine workers and their families, the Hawaiian internees, and others.

Tributes

Weglyn's friend and fellow researcher Aiko Yoshinaga Herzig, stated, "It's a profound loss, especially for those of us who were close friends. She was a pioneer, an inspiration, she was a giving, thoughtful lady. We'll miss her a lot.

"Michi laid the groundwork for what the rest of us did," Herzig stressed. "She was out to prove we were unjustly treated, and she did that. She planted the seed, the evidence, for all of us to dig, which led to success of the redress movement.

"It was a tremendous loss for all of us," emphasized Herzig, whose research work for the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians led to a recommendation from that body to provide an apology and monetary payments to each internee.

William Hohri, author of "Repairing America" and national spokesperson for the National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR), which pursued a lawsuit against the U.S. government, said, "Michi changed, through her book, in a radical and fundamental way our understanding of what happened to us during the war. It's something that will never go away.

"Michi also demonstrated that a woman who was not a graduate from a college can write a book on history in a way that is just as capable as somebody with a Ph.D. and the title of professor in a university," he said.

"She was an inspiration to all struggling writers, like me, and she was a very good personal friend," commented Hohri, who said Weglyn provided "lots of important information," based on pri-

mary documents, for the NCJAR lawsuit.

Richard Katsuda, president of the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRR)-Los Angeles, stated, "NCRR is very saddened by Michi's passing. We were aware of her acute illness and pain, and our hearts were always with her. Michi proved to be the same tenacious fighter of her illness as she was in fighting for redemption of our community.

"She was amazing. With tremendous passion, Michi researched and documented our internment story ... With that same passion, Michi fought to the end for those in our community who has been denied their due redress. Michi was truly an inspiration, a heroine for our community and our country. How we will miss her grace, warmth and fighting spirit."

Source of Inspiration

Kay Ochi, vice president of NCRR-L.A., commented, "I'm deeply saddened. Michi's great passion and dedication to redress have been a source of inspiration to me. Her research and tenacity on behalf of the railroad and mine worker families in the past few years were essential to their reparations.

"Just last month she shared her anger with me about the way the Japanese Latin Americans were being treated," she said.

"I am so grateful to have met Michi at last year's Day of Remembrance," Ochi added. "What a beautiful and charming woman. She made everyone feel very special. I will miss her tremendously."

Herb Yamanishi, national director of the Japanese American Citizens League, stated, "It's tragic. Michi was noted for her chronicling of redress and getting it out to the public about the Japanese Americans and the violations of their civil liberties and constitutional rights."

Weglyn was voted the JACLer of the Biennium in 1978 for her work.

"Years of Infamy" is still regarded as the principal publication to learn about Japanese American history, the JACL director noted. "She was the one that really got us to investigate the railroad and mining workers' eligibility for redress. She really pursued that matter, and for Japanese Latin Americans as well."

"We've lost a friend and a person who truly understood what happened to the community and how to articulate that message," Yamanishi pointed out. "Everybody in the community has been touched, to some extent, by her spirit and advocacy. It's a sad loss for the community."

Committed to Justice for Resisters

Paul Tsuneishi, Weglyn's friend and a supporter of the Nikkei draft resisters, said Weglyn "was a vocal and passionate advocate for justice and redress for all Japanese Americans. She was, to the end, committed to justice for resisters of conscience to the draft from the camps, and Japanese Peruvians and others brought to this country at the behest of our government, purportedly to be used as exchange hostages with the Japanese government during World War II.

"We have lost a great and true friend in Walter and Michi," Tsuneishi mourned.

Dr. Bob Suzuki, president of Cal Poly Pomona and a longtime social justice advocate, added, "She was a hero to so many people. No matter how many honors she received, she always had the people who suffered inequities uppermost in her mind."

At Michi Weglyn's request, there will be no formal memorial service, but informal gatherings of friends will be held in many cities (for information, contact philnash@tajitsu.org). In lieu of flowers, she requested that donations be made to the University Educational Trust, Inc., a not-for-profit California corporation, c/o California Polytechnic University, Pomona, which is administering the Walter and Michi Weglyn Endowed Chair in Multicultural Studies at the school. For more information, call (909) 869-2289 or write to President Bob Suzuki, a personal friend of Weglyn and her late husband, at Cal Poly Pomona, 3801 W. Temple Ave., Pomona, CA 91768.