

February 21, 1998, Los Angeles, William Hohri

Michi Weglyn, As I Recall

Years of Infamy did one thing for the wartime devastation of Japanese America: it properly placed the burden for this massive and egregious violations of civil and constitutional rights squarely on the President and the government of the United States. During the war and for three decades following, for most Japanese-Americans, Michi Weglyn's accusation was unthinkable. Loyalty (saluting the flag), acculturation (becoming white), and deference (being quiet) were the lessons of those years of infamy.

Up until Weglyn's work, various reasons had been adduced to explain the harsh exile and detention of Japanese-Americans, ranging from nativist pressure groups, economic opportunism, popular racism, the racism of a lieutenant general and a colonel, yellow journalism, and even military necessity. These played their roles. God only knows how blatant and pervasive America's hatred was of all things and persons Japanese. As Lawson Inada observed in 1981 before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, "If there could have been a magic pill to eradicate one's 'Jap-ness,' I shudder to think how many would have taken it."

There was no magic pill. There was, instead, an undiscovered and untold story of how the government subverted the Constitution, deceived the American people, and crossed the moral line of hostage reprisals in imprisoning an entire class of Americans because of their imagined genetic perversity.

Early in the redress movement, my friend Frank Chin told me of Kwan Kung, the red-faced Chinese god who carries both spear and pen, the two ways of fighting. In fighting for justice, we can fight with pen -- my preference. It's a good lesson. To my mind, Michi demonstrated the lesson. Her passionate, while disciplined, writing flowed into, mingled with, and made history.

In our branch of the redress movement, we took the Government to Court, with the Constitution in one hand and Years of Infamy, so to speak, in the other. Aiko and Jack Herzig continued with the kind of research Weglyn had done. I cannot think of a more compelling incentive for research than suing the Government for twenty-seven billion dollars for one hundred and twenty-five thousand people. The fact that we and the Government settled for one point six billion dollars does not diminish the conclusion that our research meshed with hers and validated Years of Infamy. Michi Weglyn led the way and we followed.

