

A Tribute to Michi Nishiura Weglyn

I feel deeply honored and privileged to be here to accept on behalf of my dear friend Michi Weglyn this richly deserved recognition of one of Japanese America's seminal writers and to speak about her influence. I came to know Michi through reading Brendan Gill's Here at the New Yorker, in which Gill relates that writers for The New Yorker sometimes received no fan mail. This prodded me to write to Gill because I admired his superb command of the language and to Michi Weglyn when I was enlightened by Years of Infamy. Gill took a reluctant six months to reply; a friendship of correspondence blossomed between Michi and me.

Years of Infamy did one thing for the wartime devastation of Japanese America: it properly placed the burden for this massive and egregious violation of civil and constitutional rights squarely on the government, ^{and the President} of the United States. During the war and for three decades following, for most Japanese-Americans, Michi's accusation was unthinkable. Loyalty, acculturation, adaptation, and deference had been the lessons of these years of infamy.

Up until Weglyn's work, various reasons had been adduced to explain the mass exclusion 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, continuing into this decade by John J. McCloy and the United States Department of Justice. God only knows, with help from John Dower's War Without Mercy, 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." I leave it to you to ponder how one pledges unqualified loyalty to this wartime America without embracing America's anti-"Jap" hatred, without hating one's own "Jap" self.

There was no magic pill. There was, instead, an undiscovered and untold story of the government's deliberate efforts to circumvent, if not subvert, the U.S. Constitution, to deceive the American people, to cross the moral line of hostage reprisals, to commit fraud on the Supreme Court in order to exclude and detain, unlawfully and unconstitutionally, an entire class of Americans because of their imagined genetic perversity. In 1968, in a project that would daunt most academics, this search for hidden history was undertaken by a once successful but then retired theatrical costume designer, who never finished college. Instead of relying solely on published works, she examined primary documents in the National Archives and elsewhere. The National Archives is like a filing cabinet with a million drawers. Instead of pages, one reads linear feet. It took Michi eight years of research and writing and absorbing one hundred letters of rejection to get Years of Infamy published.

Years of Infamy became the watershed in the liberation of Japanese America. Although its 1976 publication followed the beginning of the movement for Japanese-American redress by about six years, the movement itself was slow and uncertain in beginning. Edison Uno began it as the self-proclaimed "Majority of One." His idea was picked up ^{by} the Seattle Evacuation Redress Committee of the Seattle Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. This committee pressed the national JACL to act. In 1976, the JACL took its first cautious step towards redress by forming a National Committee

for Redress. Two years later, the JACL, still prodded by the Seattle committee, took what appeared to be a decisive step to seek redress through congressional legislation. A few months later, however, still cautious, the JACL took a step backwards or sideways, depending on one's perspective, and switched to seeking the establishment of a congressional study commission. I was dismayed. So were members of the Seattle committee. In May 1979, in reaction to this, the National Council for Japanese American Redress was formed. The Council's first act was to ask Representative Mike Lowry to introduce redress legislation in the U.S. Congress. In November 1979, following the introduction of study commission proposals, the first Lowry Redress Bill was introduced. For the first time in our history, using this bill as vehicle, a second Japanese-American voice was heard in Congress. It rejected the commission and demanded redress. It was a voice informed by Years of Infamy.

By 1983, the spirit of Years of Infamy found its way into the court complaint of William Hohri et al. versus The United States of America. By 1983, the National Council, with Aiko and Jack Herzig following Michi's example, had exhumed tens of thousands of documents from the National Archives. One of the striking differences in redressing grievances between a lawsuit and a legislative act is the court's requirement that one spell out one's grievances, citing the historical events and legal principles that impell litigation, while the Congress mutes rationale and concentrates on the remedy. Another difference is in the leverage of the law based upon the Constitution that protects individual and minority rights ~~and~~ as opposed to the will of the majority as expressed through their elected representatives. The discoveries and accusations in Years of Infamy found official expression in this lawsuit. And Japanese America responded.

It is hard to measure the effect the redress movement has had on Japanese-Americans. But I think we have some indication in the hundreds of thousands of dollars the National Council has raised from 1980 to the present for a high-risk lawsuit. Most has come from individuals, largely Nisei. I think it is safe to say that Japanese America will never be the same.

We have been to the Supreme Court once. We will probably be there again. Our day in the Court last April was memorable. Michi and Walter Weglyn, Fred and Kathryn Korematsu, Gordon Hirabayashi, most of our named plaintiffs, friends, and supporters gathered in Washington in a confluence of forces, heroes, symbols, and ordinary people from the past and present. In a moment as memorable as the courtroom and press conference, I had great fun accusing Michi, with all her politeness and properness, of being the quintessential Nisei. She *is* Nisei. She is also the liberation of the Nisei.

It is altogether fitting and proper that we recognize and honor Michi Nishiura Weglyn for her achievement in writing Years of Infamy. The Asian Pacific Students' Committee of Washington State University is to be commended for establishing this roll of honor and placing Michi's name at its head. Michi asks me to express to you her deepest gratitude. But do not leave her here. Take her with you as an example of what Robert Hutchins described as education for citizenship. Take her with you as a lesson in the triumph of documented, verifiable truth over false, ~~acceptable~~^{accepted} theory. Take her with you as a guide to passionate, yet disciplined, writing flowing into, mingling with, and making history.

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