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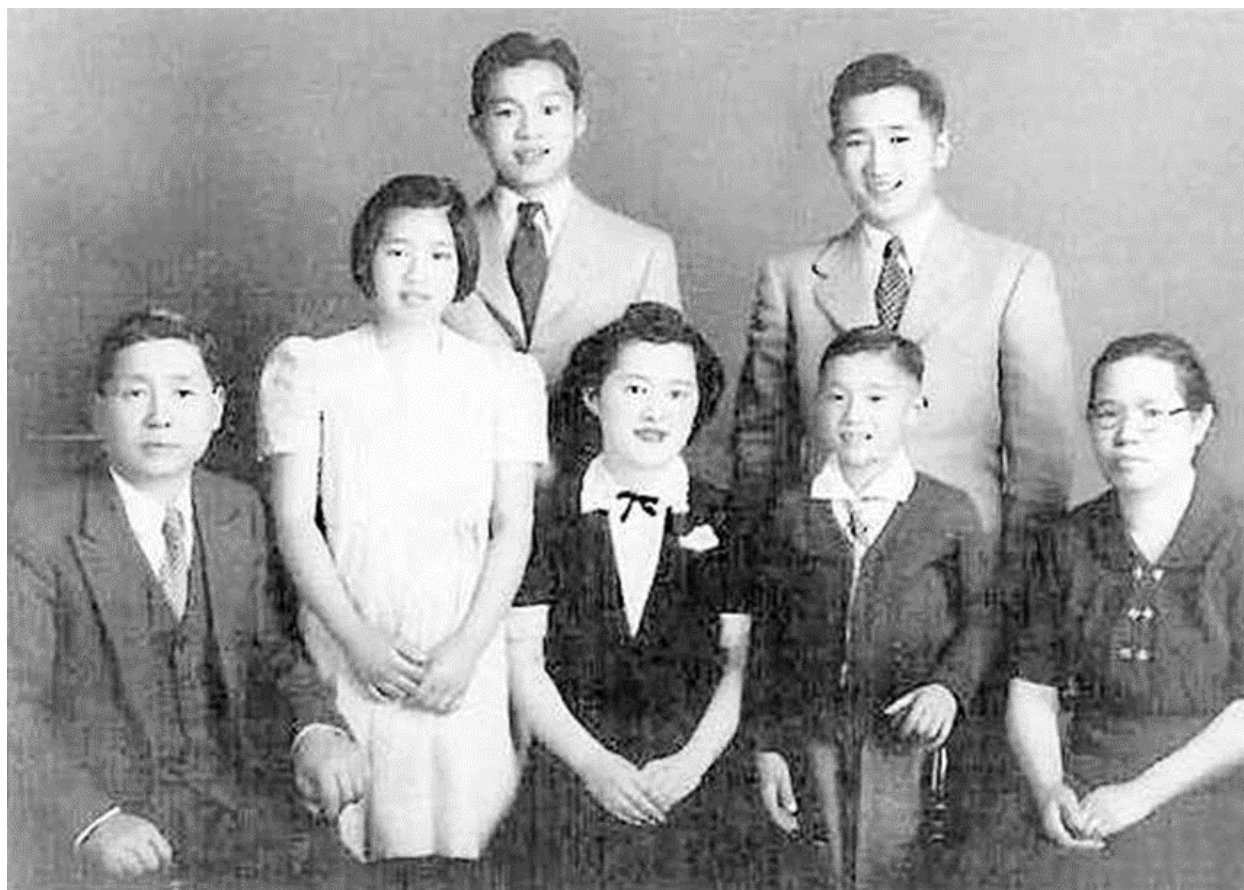
Why we need to preserve the painful memories of my family's incarceration

EXECUTIVE ORDER 9066

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Courtesy of Elise Takahama

Yoshitaka, left, and Shizue Watanabe, right, with their five children — from front left, Toshiko, Kimiko and Tadao; from back left, Masao and Shigeo — before President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942. Yoshitaka and Shizue Watanabe are the great-grandfather and great-grandmother of reporter Elise Takahama.

My great-grandfather emigrated from Japan in the early 1900s and was running a fruit and vegetable stand at Pike Place Market when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

A few months later, he was arrested by the FBI with no explanation, separated from his

wife and five children and detained for nearly two years. He was moved often, and his family usually had few details about where he was being held.

He and his family were among the 120,000 people of Japanese descent forced from

their West Coast homes and imprisoned in desolate desert camps during World War II.

Even now, I ache thinking about the barbed-wire fences and armed guard towers that surrounded our families.

It's a story my cousins and I have been immersed in nearly our entire lives. Most of us don't have strong memories of our grandparents, but over the years we've pieced together the devastating toll this piece of history had on our community.

Yet we know it's a story at risk of being forgotten.

As America marks the 80th anniversary Saturday of the infamous Executive Order 9066 that launched the mass incarceration, efforts are underway to preserve these painful memories for future generations of Americans before they fade with time.

The history remains difficult for many Japanese Americans to talk about, but our shared goal of preserving the past has kept the community close. It's not just a Japanese American story, community leaders remind us. It's a deeply American one that offers lessons in protecting civil rights, especially during times of crisis when hysteria, fear and prejudices can too easily overturn them.

One of the most well-known organizations still tackling this mission is Denshō, a nonprofit founded in Seattle in 1996 that records oral testimonies of those incarcerated during World War II.

But with each Day of Remembrance that passes, fewer incarcerated are around to recount their experiences. At Denshō, 75% of Japanese Americans interviewed for the online archives have died.

It's left many of us to wonder how we're going to keep the story alive.

"It's a progression in many ways," said Tom Ikeda, Denshō founder and executive

director. "The nisei generation [second-generation Japanese Americans] really emphasized not forgetting the stories. My generation [sansei, or third-generation] found ways to then preserve them. And in terms of how the story will exist in the future, it's up to new generations."

In my family, my grandparents, Shigeo and Joanne Watanabe, died young. My great-aunts and great-uncles are gone. The only person in my family who has firsthand camp memories is my uncle, now 86 years old. He was 6 when he was taken to Manzanar in Central California, one of 10 long-term incarceration camps throughout the West and in Arkansas.

Some Japanese Americans memorialized their experiences — my great-aunt, Auntie Kim, testified to a government commission after being released from camp, and my uncle, Ron, wrote a book — but many others did not.

It still stings I never had a chance to meet my grandparents or hear in their own words how they remembered a time when they were considered a threat.

My cousins and I question how they got through it.

"We were scared," Auntie Kim testified in 1981 to the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, whose research led to the establishment of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. The law included a public government apology and distributed redress payments of \$20,000 to each person incarcerated.

Auntie Kim continued in her testimony, "He did not know why he was imprisoned; neither did we. All we knew was that other men had been taken too. We were never able to find out why."

Years later, in 2002, my family learned it was because he was a leader in the Japanese American community, according to a 132-page Department of Justice file on my great-grandfather.

Meanwhile, my grandfather, Auntie Kim and three other siblings were forced from their Seattle home. They were first taken to the Puyallup Assembly Center, then called “Camp Harmony” and now known as the grounds of the Washington State Fair. They and more than 7,000 others were kept in cramped stalls normally used for farm animals.

“They had a lot of nerve calling it Camp Harmony,” Uncle Mas, my great-uncle, says in a Denshō interview from 1998.

They were later moved to the Minidoka War Relocation Center, a camp in south-central Idaho primarily made up of Japanese Americans from Seattle, Portland and other parts of the Pacific Northwest. Minidoka has since been declared a National Historic Site.

Without their father, the family’s relationships deteriorated in camp, Auntie Kim has said.

My grandfather and Uncle Mas volunteered to join the U.S. Army, wanting to prove loyalty. My grandfather joined the Army’s Military Intelligence Service as a translator. Auntie Kim’s husband, Uncle Ned, and Uncle Mas joined the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a unit almost entirely composed of nisei soldiers.

The unit went on to become one of the most decorated in the history of the American military, but becoming a U.S. soldier was a tough decision.

“I don’t know which was worse — being locked up in camp or going off to war,” Uncle Mas says in the Denshō interview. “In my mind, barbed wires aren’t very inviting.”

Many members of the 442nd never made it back home, including Uncle Ned, who was killed in France during a battle to rescue a Texas battalion. His funeral, decorated with poinsettias, was held at Minidoka.

Years later, Auntie Kim said she still couldn’t shake feelings of bitterness.

“I think perhaps we did not speak out enough then; that we should have protested our treatment,” she testified. “So I feel I must speak out now.”

The work to preserve these stories continues, said Ikeda, of Denshō. Fortunately, he said, there are signs the yonsei, or fourth-generation Japanese Americans like myself, are stepping up.

For this year’s Day of Remembrance, a young Japanese American artist is creating a visual memory map using camp artifacts. Other community members, including Ikeda’s daughter, are also working on introducing augmented reality to a Bellevue Arts Museum mural of nisei farmers during and before the war, allowing some of the farmers to “come to life,” he said.

“[The farmers] have passed away, but are talking about their experiences in Bellevue during the war ... in the voices of interviews we collected about 25 years ago,” Ikeda said.

“We realized the next generation wouldn’t have access to the face-to-face storytelling we were able to do,” he added. “So preserving them and watching people reuse these stories now is very, very powerful.”

Still, the shattering experience of having their loyalty questioned had long-lasting impacts, compelling some Japanese Americans to shy away from their Japanese culture. My grandparents, who learned Japanese as kids, never pushed their children to go to Japanese language school because they wanted them to be “American,” my mom has said.

“It’s large-scale trauma that was largely brushed under the rug,” my cousin Aimee said recently. “I’m so sure that affected Grandma and Grandpa. I remember my dad saying stuff like they were told to blend in growing up — aka act less Asian. ... That kind of stuff can eat at your identity.”

Some families have lost a lot of those ties to Japanese culture, while others have worked hard to retain them.

My father was born in Japan, and he and my mom were determined to pass on traditions.

In the spring, we celebrated Hinamatsuri, or Girls' Day, with traditional Japanese dolls and candy. During the summer, we spent weekends at Obon festivals, summertime Buddhist events that commemorate one's ancestors.

And for years, I played basketball in Asian American youth leagues, popular especially in Southern California, where I grew up.

At the time, these were all things I thought of as general childhood fun. Yet my oldest cousin recently wondered if our parents' desire to keep us involved in Japanese American activities stemmed from an urge to reclaim and be proud of a culture regarded with suspicion and hostility by the U.S. government and many Americans 80 years ago.

Even now we're reminded our attempts at promoting culture and preserving history can be overlooked.

Last year, the site of the Minidoka camp caught the eye of energy developers hoping to build Idaho's largest wind farm in the area, though former incarcerated and their families worry a 400-turbine farm would drastically change the landscape, according to a report in High Country News.

"Here's another example of these large entities saying, 'We have to do this for the benefit of society' and 'Sure, this is important to you guys, but still, get out of the way so we can do this,'" Ikeda said. "It's more than just the microissue of what's happening — it's about how historically communities of color have been treated."

My family members have described Minidoka as a dusty, barren desert that still raises difficult memories. Their time there makes the space still feel sacred, even if in a gut-wrenching sort of way.

I know young and future generations will create new ways of telling the story of World War II incarceration. I hope others will listen.

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