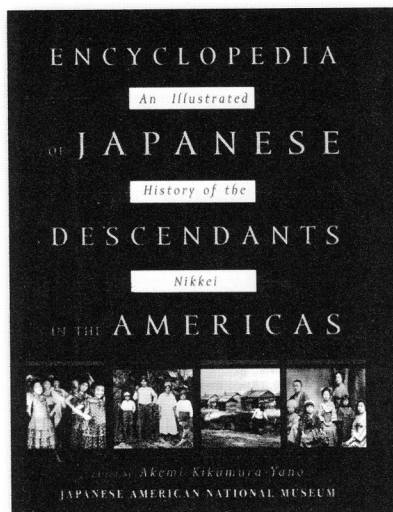


Nikkei, not just JA

By Gil Asakawa

I identify myself as a Japanese American, but I use the term “Nikkei” or “Nikkeijin” freely. Yes, the Nikkei is the word for the Japanese stock market. But no, that’s not what I mean. “Nikkei” means “of Japanese descent,” and “Nikkeijin” means someone of Japanese descent who is not Japanese, a citizen of another country. And that includes a significant number of Japanese Canadians and Japanese Latin Americans.



According to the exhaustively researched book *Encyclopedia of Japanese Descendants in the Americas* (a 2002 project of the Japanese American National Museum published by Altamira Press), there were 760,916 Nikkei in the US in 1993. Nikkei were also spread throughout Asia (the largest number, almost 30,000 in China), Europe (3,886 in the UK, 3296

in Germany and 2832 in France), Africa (all of 120 in Egypt in 1993), 55,111 in Canada and in Latin America, an astonishing 620,370 in Brazil.

There’s even an Panamerican Nikkei Association (APN), which was started in Mexico City in 1981 and has representatives from 12 countries in the Americas. According to the APN, there are currently 1,227,000 Nikkei in Brazil, followed by 1,000,000 in the US and 80,000 in Peru, 55,000 in Canada and 40,000 in Argentina.

The first Japanese government-sponsored group of laborers were sent to Hawaii in 1885 to work on the sugar and pineapple plantations, but it didn’t take long for entrepreneurs to send laborers from Japan elsewhere: in 1886, 40 workers were sent by an Englishman to Thursday Island in the Pacific, and 100 Japanese were sent to a sugar plantation in Australia. The first Japanese immigrants in Mexico were 28 laborers sent to begin a farm colony in Chiapas. The Japanese didn’t arrive in Brazil until 1908, but the Portuguese-speaking country eventually became the largest stronghold of Nikikeijin in America. The first 790 Japanese landed in Peru in 1899, with a portion of those leaving for Bolivia to work in the rubber forests there. Japanese Peruvians are commonplace enough (there were 55,472 in 1993) that a Japanese Peruvian, Alberto Fujimori (he was nicknamed “Chino” in his country) became

Peru’s president in 1990. In 2000, he fled the country after series of scandals. The final scandal was that though he was a Nisei born in Peru, his birth was registered with the Japanese consulate, making him a dual citizen. He never renounced his Japanese citizenship, making him legally ineligible to run for president in Peru, but making him eligible for political asylum in Japan, where he’s stayed since he left office.

Peruvian Japanese are still embroiled in a controversy over the same internment that JAs were subjected to during World War II. In 1996, almost a decade after the US government’s official apology to Japanese Americans for internment, a class action suit, *Mochizuki v. the United States*, was filed to gain redress for the wartime incarceration of 2000 Japanese Latin Americans, most of whom were from Peru.

When the war began the US pressured Latin American countries into signing a unity pact to protect the Western hemisphere, which included the forced repatriation of Axis officials through the US. Peru sent not only Japanese officials to the US to be repatriated to Japan, but also people who had nothing to do with the Japanese government, including women and children. Many were simply kidnapped by the Peruvian police and handed over to the US. These people of Japanese descent from Latin America, whether they were Japanese citizens or citizens of Latin American countries, were imprisoned in a US Justice Department camp in Crystal City, Texas during the war.

“Other than white”

The first Japanese Canadian was a sailor and laborer from Yokohama named Manzo Nagano, who arrived in 1877 in Vancouver and worked for seven years before returning to Japan, opening a restaurant in Seattle and finally settling in Victoria and ending up a successful businessman and a major figure in the local Nikkei community. In 1977, the centennial of Nagano’s arrival in Canada was marked by a ceremony naming a mountain after him—an honor yet to be bestowed on any Japanese American.

The first group of contract laborers from Japan arrived in Canada as mineworkers in Vancouver in 1891; the Japanese immigration to Canada was similar to the Nikkei experience in the US. They fought prejudice and racist legislation, established ethnically-segregated communities, brought wives from Japan and began families (the first Canadian Nisei, Katsuji Oya, was born in 1889), formed churches for worship (the first Christian for Japanese parishioners opened in Vancouver in 1894, and the first Buddhist temple in 1905), started up Japanese newspapers,

and found ways to maintain their heritage in the New World.

In 1919, because half of the fishing licenses in British Columbia were given to Nikkei fishermen, the government began reducing the number of licenses made available to anyone "other than white."

Immigration of Japanese was limited several times in the years leading up to World War II. Even though more than 75 percent of the 23,303 Nikkei living in Canada at the start of 1941 were Canadian citizens, they were all required to register when war broke out against Japan. Parallel to the JA internment experience, more than 12,000 people of Japanese ancestry were evacuated from "protected areas" declared along the coast of British Columbia and sent to internment camps inland. Though not as

restrictive as the camps in the US, the Canadian government passed a law that allowed them to sell off Nikkei property that had been held in custody.

Toward the end of the war, Japanese Canadians were allowed to enlist in the military, and many were allowed to resettle throughout the country, so long as they were east of the Rocky Mountains. Today, the heritage of the Japanese Canadian community is preserved by organizations such as the Japanese Canadian National Museum and the National Association of Japanese Canadians. ✨

This article is reprinted with permission from Gil Asakawa's *Nikkei View*, a web site at <http://nikkeiview.com>. Gil Asakawa is a Sansei and the author of *Being Japanese American* (2004), published by Stone Bridge Press.

Internment in Mexico

By Sandina Robbins

The US World War II policy of "forced evacuation" affected thousands of people from the Axis countries living in Latin America. Mostly, people of Japanese origin were tagged as "dangerous."

After Pearl Harbor, wartime hysteria made any Japanese in the Western hemisphere suspect. There was fear that Japan might attack the Panama Canal and that those of Japanese descent could be spies. Many Latin American governments cooperated with the United States by rounding up Japanese diplomats and people of Japanese ancestry. Countries such as Mexico ordered Japanese immigrants to move inland, away from the US border and coastal areas.

Enrique Shibayama was 10 years old when a Mexican government official ordered his family to leave Mexicali, near the California border. Shibayama says the official searched his family's belongings, looking for any objects that could be classified as "dangerous."

"So in my own case, they confiscated my little toy trumpet," he says. "And also my father had to surrender the radio and the cameras." Shibayama, past President of the Japanese-Mexican Association, says "hundreds of families here had to pick up and move, literally overnight."

"Todo lo malbarataron. . ."

Historian Maria Elena Ota is a Mexican Nisei. Her book on Japanese immigration to Mexico describes how cotton farmers were suddenly uprooted by the war. "Todo lo malbarataron," she says: "They had to sell all they owned for very little. They lost everything; practically gave it away! Farm tools, their homes, cars and tractors, everything."

But unlike in the United States, Shibayama says Japanese-Mexicans were relatively free. "We didn't have barbed wire in the camps, and no soldiers. But of course, if we wanted to go more than 40 or 50 kilometers, we had to ask for a permit."

Japanese-Mexican Mutual Aid Societies sprung up to help ease the pain of forced relocation. Shibayama's father was in charge of Telmixco, an old hacienda outside Mexico City. "A few wealthy Japanese-Mexican businessmen bought the land to help those with no other place to go. Some 200 families lived and worked on the hacienda. After the war, most of them chose not to return to Mexicali. They didn't want to have to start over again from scratch."

Today, many Japanese-Mexicans are successful business people and professionals. Some have held important positions in the Mexican government. Shibayama says it's not good to dwell on the past, but rather to "learn from the past and to be careful not to commit the same mistakes of the past."

A US Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians published a report in 1982 entitled "Personal Justice Denied." It reads: "Whatever justification is offered for this treatment of enemy aliens, many Latin American Japanese never saw their homes again, after remaining many years in a kind of legal no-man's land. Their history is one of the strange, unhappy, largely forgotten stories of World War II." ✨

Radio journalist Sandina Robbins filed this story from Mexico City in 1995 for "Marketplace," which airs on National Public Radio, as part of a series on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. She is now based in Oakland, California.