

Making Peace with History

By Momo Yashima

This is an excerpt from "A Divided Community," a dramatic reading based on historical fact. Conceived by Frank Chin, with excerpts from his book *Born in the USA*. Additional material by Frank Emi, Yosh Kuromiya, Paul Tsuneishi, Mits Koshiyama and Momo Yashima.

This work-in-progress was presented in San Francisco at the California Conference on the Internment of Japanese Americans, sponsored by the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program, California State Library, in June 2005. It was performed by one of the authors, Momo Yashima, and three Nisei draft resisters who lived this story.

Momo Yashima: Sixty years ago, a series of events happened that divided the Japanese American community. Certain members of the community—those who dared to step forward to protest the drafting of "alien" citizens during World War II—were ostracized and then forgotten.

Today, we have three men who were actually in the thick of things: Frank Emi, Yosh Kuromiya and Mits Koshiyama, members of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee. Joining us as well is Paul Tsuneishi, a World War II veteran.

Japanese Americans have been called "The Model Minority" and the "Quiet Americans," in part because the story of wartime resisters has been sanitized, leaving our history incomplete.

We would like to present this dramatic reading to reveal the story and to do it in a not-so-quiet-voice...

Narrator (Momo): 1930. The Nisei, the first generation born in America, were out of college. They were doctors and lawyers. They were publishing and editing their own newspapers and magazines. In English. They thought they would enter a dialog between Japanese and whites about their destiny in America. James Matsumoto Omura was a flower buyer by day and, by night, the editor of *Current Life*, "a magazine for the America-born Japanese."

James Omura (read by Yosh Kuromiya): I encourage the literati as another method of pushing our way into the mainstream. I spotlighted talented Nisei...I reviewed books.

Momo: The immigrant Issei were barred from citizenship but that didn't dampen their commitment to the country and language of their children. Shisei Tsuneishi, a farmer and the father of ten children, was a lifelong poet. He wrote and translated *Issei Poem* in Los Angeles in 1921:

We let our laughing children totter out
Into the sunshine warm to run about;
And the tears of my grief betray
As I watch them at play.
Ah, we are of despised and hated race,
To call our own, we have no single place.

Yet, somewhere, with our minds as calm and sane,
As the stainless atmosphere after rain;
Yet once, oh, let us sing,
With voices cheerily ring:
"This is our farmland, this is our home,
Forever our: no more we roam.

Any Japanese American with an idea, a philosophy, an interpretation, a story, a poem about Japanese America published in *Current Life*. Omura didn't agree with all that he published; what counted was, he published.

Omura had been publishing *Current Life* for about two years when World War II came to Japanese America. In the February 1942 issue he wrote:

James Omura: "The rising clamor for mass evacuation into the interior of all persons with Japanese faces is a cause for alarm. Such a movement would trespass upon fundamental precepts of our

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The troubles of the Nisei are strikingly analogous to the . . .
people of Jewish birth.

Every Nisei should be unalterably opposed to mass evacuation. Some Nisei Americans publicly encourage voluntary evacuation as a symbol of loyalty. Voluntary evacuation by the Nisei is a false idea of loyalty and is a betrayal of their inherent rights."

Momo: Omura was speaking of Mike Masaoka and the Japanese American Citizens' League (JACL). Masaoka appeared before the congressional Tolan Committee in San Francisco on February 21, 1942, urging mass evacuation of Issei and Nisei for their own protection. James Omura also appeared before the Tolan Committee:

James Omura: I requested to be heard here due largely to the fact that I am strongly opposed to mass evacuation of American-born Japanese . . . I suppose you understand that I am in some measure opposed to what other representatives of the Japanese community have said here before this committee.

I would like to ask the committee: has the Gestapo come to America? Have we not risen in righteous anger at Hitler's mistreatment of the Jews? Then, is it not incongruous that citizen Americans of Japanese descent should be similarly mistreated and persecuted? Is citizenship such a light and transient thing that that which is our inalienable right in normal times can be torn from us in times of war?"

Frank Emi (read by himself): 310 men resisted the draft from the mainland prison camps. This resistance questioned the legality of conscripting men incarcerated in the camps: "Free us before you draft us."

Momo: The FBI and the JACL combined their resources to target the only organized camp resistance. The Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee (FPC) was organized by Kiyoshi Okamoto to test the constitutionality of the laws that kept the Nisei enclosed by wire, guards and the desert. Frank Emi and his brother Art wrote and sent out press releases:

Frank Emi: No newspaper, Japanese American or metro daily would print the releases sent by our committee but one—James Omura's Denver Rocky Shimo!

On March 4, 1944 we passed out a bulletin that got the Fair Play Committee leaders arrested: "One for all and all for one."

We, the Nisei, have been complacent and too inarticulate to question the unconstitutional acts that we were subjected to. If ever there was a time for decisive action, it is now! We members of the FPC are not afraid to go to war—we would gladly sacrifice our lives to protect and uphold the principals and ideals of our country as set forth in the

Constitution and the Bill of Rights . . .but, have we been given such freedom, such liberty, such justice, such protection? NO!

We feel that the present program of drafting us from this concentration camp is unjust, unconstitutional, and against all principals of civilized usage, and therefore, we members of the Fair Play Committee hereby refuse to go to the physical examination or to the induction if or when we are called, in order to contest the issue.

Momo: James Omura reported and commented on draft resistance happening in the camps from California to Wyoming. February, 1944:

James Omura: Insofar as the movement itself is concerned, the Nisei are within their rights to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Expatriation is not the answer to our eventual redemption of democratic and constitutional rights. . .We agree that the constitution gives us certain inalienable and civil rights. We do not dispute the fact that such rights have been largely stripped . . .from us. We further agree that the government should restore a large part of those rights before asking us to contribute our lives to the welfare of the nation—to sacrifice our lives on the field of battle . . .

There is no reason why we should not petition for a redress of grievances, but there is every reason why we should not resist the draft in the way it is being done now.

Momo: The trial of the 63 Heart Mountain draft resisters was the largest draft resister trial in the history of the United States, and was the largest criminal case in Cheyenne's history. The resisters elected against a jury trial and decided to take their chances with the judge.

Mits Koshiyama (read by himself): We thought we had a chance by allowing a Federal judge, T. Blake Kennedy, to settle the matter. However, hopes dimmed when he referred to us resisters as "you Jap boys."

The trial, *Fuji vs. USA*, ended on June 26, 1944. Judge Kennedy found us guilty and sentenced us to three years in a federal penitentiary. The older men were sent to Leavenworth, Kansas. We younger men did our time at Mc Neil Island Federal Penitentiary in Washington state.

Momo: In *Okamoto vs. USA*, the seven leaders of the Fair Play Committee and James Okura were indicted on a charge of conspiring to violate the Selective Service Act, aiding and abetting and counseling others to resist the draft. This went to the jury on November 2, 1944.

Frank Emi: The verdict was delivered—the journalist Okura was acquitted, but financially and professionally ruined. Kiyoshi Okamoto, Paul Nakadate, myself and Isamu Horino were sentenced to four years. Guntaro Kubota, Ben Wakaye and Minoru Tamesa were sentenced to two years, all to be served at Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary.

Momo: On December 26, 1946, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals, sitting in Denver, reversed the convictions of all seven leaders of the FPC on the grounds the trial judge, Eugene Rice, failed to instruct the jury that the evacuees had a legal right to challenge the constitutionality of the draft board orders.

In March, 1947, attorney A.L. Wirin went before the President's Amnesty Board and asked that all the 263 Nisei convicted of violating the draft from all the camps be granted a presidential pardon.

Christmas Eve, 1947, a year after the seven leaders won a reversal of their convictions, 263

resisters were granted a presidential pardon and a restoration of their rights. But what good did that do? This violation of the law affected everyone! This was not just the resisters'

issue.

Omura chose to distance himself from the community that so disappointed him. He worked as a landscape contractor, wrote, spent time with friends, gave numerous interviews, worked with college professors on oral histories and finally, received many honors—some from as far away as Great Britain.

In 1992, a celebration reunion of the Fair Play Committee was put together, headed by writer Frank Chin. This was the start of a Japanese American historical renaissance—the very seed Omura had planted so long ago. In February 1994, Los Angeles' "Day of Remembrance" honored James Omura with the Fighting Spirit Award from Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, bestowed on individuals dedicated to the fight for justice. He died in June of that year.

Paul Tsuneishi: I, Paul Tsuneishi. am the son of poet Shisei Tsuneishi, who wrote and translated *Issei Poem*, that you heard earlier. I was a student at Pasadena junior college, too. But I didn't have a life. In camp, I got one. I'm a World War II vet and served in the Military Intelligence Service with three of my brothers. Initially, a lot of vets resented those of you who resisted the draft. It wasn't until later that I understood the depth of the resisters' commitment.

I became governor of the Pacific Southwest District Council of the JACL in the mid 1970s. We pushed for and got national congressional hearings to be held all over the country. In 1981, the hearing would be in Los Angeles. I asked my then 93-year-old father to write something for the hearing. When he showed me his typed speech, I was surprised to learn he had supported the resisters in Heart Mountain, and was prepared to testify for them when they went to their court trial in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Probably because I am my father's son, I came to a new understanding and hold a profound respect for these men who stood up and paid the price of rejection, vilification and were called traitors. I am here today to show the solidarity I feel toward these men.

(To Momo) And what about you? You weren't even around. What's this to you?

Momo: I too, am my parents' daughter. I grew up within this divided and confusing community. I am willing to do anything I can to help heal the division that I have seen all my life. For 60 years, all of us were denied the knowledge of what you guys did. I believe that by bringing this story to the community, it is the first step in the healing process. □

Momo Yashima is the daughter of artists and activists Taro and Mitsu Yashima, who were imprisoned in Japan for resisting the Imperial army. They escaped to New York and worked for the Office of War Information, broadcasting anti-war propaganda in Japanese. Taro Yashima wrote books about his experiences and illustrated them with cartoon caricatures before finding his niche as an award-winning author of books for children. A short piece on his work appeared in *Nikkei Heritage* Vol.IX, Number 2, the Manga issue.

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