Internment or Incarceration: Aiko Herzig's Fight fo

by Ben Hamamoto

This article draws heavily on Aiko Herzig's "Words Can Lie or Clarify," which can be read in its entirety online.

The World War II incarceration of West Coast *Nikkei* was perhaps the most defining event for Japanese America. In the decades that followed, after battles both external and internal, many aspects of this injustice have been addressed. The U.S. government admitted its actions were based on "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership." It extended an official apology, paid token reparations to victims and vacated the criminal convictions of those who resisted. Aiko Yoshinaga-Herzig's research and activism was invaluable to all these victories, but for her, there is still unfinished business to be addressed. Today, at 87-years-of-age, she continues to fight against the usage of euphemisms, such as "internment," to describe what happened to more than 110,000 Japanese Americans during the second World War.

Aiko was 17 when she and her family were taken from their Los Angeles home in 1941, and incarcerated in three concentration camps: Manzanar in California, Jerome and Rohwer in Arkansas. But it wasn't until the Vietnam War, when she was in her 50s, that Aiko began thinking about the way governments and the media use terminology to manipulate people's perception. She had followed relatives to New York and was living out her life as a working mother, but politics found their way into the home when she began discussing the Vietnam War—and the killing of 500 Vietnamese villagers at My Lai—with her teenage daughter.

> "incarcerating *Nikkei* was necessary not because there was no time to determine who was and who wasn't loyal... but because , it was argued that Japanese cultural traits prevented government officials from distinguishing the loyal from the dis-loyal all together... It was impossible to separate the sheep from the goats."- Lt. General DeWitt

"We discussed the current news and read of U.S. military press officers trying to explain the destruction of villages and the death of civilians with statements, such as 'They were communists, and we had to destroy the village in order to save them from communism,'" she wrote in her essay, 'Words Can Lie Or Clarify.' "I began to think of words that reflected puzzling contradictions between events as they actually happened versus the words that were used to describe them."

She became interested in the civil rights, counter-culture and anti-war movements and started to connect them to the Japanese American experience.

"The more I watched the brutal suppression of peaceful protest movements the more I realized that I had personally experienced discrimination in many ways: rejected by landlords and employers who 'did not want Japs,' refused my high school diploma by a racist principal, coerced to use 'Louise' instead of my real first name which many non-Japanese found difficult to remember--the list of daily humiliations was long," she wrote. "Gradually I developed a sense of righteous indignation and outrage about social injustices experienced by many groups in the U.S., and I began to seek out events and organizations to learn more and become involved in political change."

She connected with other *Nikkei* activists on the East Coast, including Yuri and Bill Kochiyama, Shizu "Minn" Matsuda, the Iijima family-Kazu, Tak and Chris--Mitzi Sawada, June Kushino, Chiyeko Watanabe. She became politicized and took to the streets, protesting for human and civil rights.

In the late 1970s, she married Jack Herzig, a retired paratrooper and counter-intelligence soldier. They moved to a home in Virginia near the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and her activism took on a new dimension. Initially, she conducted research at the archives on her own family. But Michi Nishiura Weglyn—author of "Years of Infamy," whose own meticulous research revealed previously unknown facts that refuted the claim of "military necessity" for Executive Order 9066 and the vast gulag of concentration camps that ensued—suggested that Aiko conduct research similar to her own.

"Michi's relentless pursuit of the long-concealed truth inspired me to travel to other sites with Jack, who had joined me in the search for truth. We visited institutions [in some States] where official records and private collections were accessioned," Aiko explained. "As a career soldier for a good part of his life, [Jack] had fought during WW II on the front lines in the Pacific Theater to secure the liberty and freedoms of Americans while at the very same time--he learned through the research in which we were engaged--our government was denying its own citizens their constitutional rights and benefits by uprooting and incarcerating them. For himself and for the many very close trooper friends who lost their lives during World War II, he felt very betrayed by his own country."

She and Jack chased evidence, following a paper trail of documents—if something in a government correspondence seemed suspicious, they would track down, to the extent possible, the letters or memos that preceded and followed it.

In 1980, Congress established the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Citizens (CWRIC), to examine the Japanese American incarceration. Aiko joined in as a researcher, having accumulated over 8,000 documents by that time.

While conducting this research, she increasingly began to notice how government officials, scholars, and journalists used euphemism to conceal the injustice perpetrated

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towards *Nikkei*. For instance, the commonly used term "evacuation" implied the incarceration was for the safety of West Coast *Nikkei*. "Relocation," as well, didn't capture the compulsory aspect of the forced removal, the confinement in the new location, or the trauma it inflicted, of leaving one's home behind.

Perhaps most problematic, was the term "internment" which is still widely used by the government, the educational system and the mainstream media today. The word, when used accurately, refers to the incarceration of enemy aliens in wartime, which the West Coast *Nikkei*, many of them U.S. citizens, were not. "Concentration camps," which house political prisoners, is a more accurate term to describe the Japanese American incarceration.



A recent photo of Aiko Yoshinaga-Herzig
courtesy of the office of Assemblyman Warren Furutani

Aiko began compiling a list of these euphemistic terms, which became the basis of her seminal essay, "Words Can Lie Or Clarify: Terminology of the World War II Incarceration of Japanese Americans."

At around this time, Raymond Okamura, a historical revisionist and activist, submitted his own statement on euphemisms to the CWRIC, criticizing the usage of the same terms Aiko was taking issue with. He later revised and published the statement in The Journal of Ethnic Studies with a provocative title, "The American Concentration Camps: A Cover-Up through Euphemistic Terminology," in which he made a direct connection with euphemisms used by the Nazis, such as 'emigration,' 'evacuation,' 'final solution,' 'relocation,' 'resettlement,' and 'special treatment' which were code words for the Nazi program of mass murder. Okamura also implicitly criticized academics for giving their works provocative titles that included words like "concentration camps" when referring to the Nikkei incarceration, but reverted to "old 'evacuation-relocation' nomenclature in their text, tables, and illustrations."

In 1982, the CWRIC's final report to Congress, "Personal Justice Denied," was published. It had a huge impact, thanks, in part, to a game-changing document that Aiko discovered. In an early draft of a report by Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt to his Army superiors, he asserted that incarcerating Nikkei was necessary, because Japanese cultural traits prevented officials from distinguishing between the loyal and disloyal altogether, "it was impossible to separate the sheep from the goats."

There were other strong evidences in the original draft report that the incarceration was the result of "race prejudice" instead of military necessity and proved instrumental in the securing an official government apology and redress money, as well as a victory for Fred Y. Korematsu, Gordon K. Hirabayashi, and Minoru Yasui, who had challenged the incarceration at the time it happened, in a new Supreme Court case that Aiko was also involved in.

One thing the CWRIC's report didn't do, though, was resolve the euphemism controversy. According to "Words Can Lie or Clarify," the report "admitted... that terms like 'concentration camps' had indeed been used by U.S. officials in conjunction with WRA-run facilities, but then concluded by supporting the use of wartime euphemisms as terms generally accepted in the wartime period," arguing that "the Nazis called their death camps 'concentration camp; and today, most people associate the term 'concentration camp' with Nazi extermination centers."

Professor Roger Daniels also took up the cause of combating euphemisms. He argued that 'internment' is a "well-defined legal process by which enemy nationals [i.e., *Issei*,] who were not allowed to become U.S. citizens] are placed in confinement in time of war.... What happened to the...West Coast Japanese was lawless." He added that continuous misuse of the term could prevent people from understanding what really happened to Japanese Americans during World War II.

Many academics and activists felt the same way and a movement was beginning to form.

In 1995, a debate occurred when the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) was invited to mount an exhibit called "America's Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience" at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Diane Dayson, superintendent of the Statue of Liberty National Monument, under which the Ellis Island Immigration Museum operates, told JANM that "she had received substantial expressions of concern from the National Park Service regional office about the use of the term 'concentration camp' in the title, as "this phrase today is used to refer to death camps; New York City has a very large Jewish community that could be offended by or misunderstand the use of this phrase."

A dialogue between *Nikkei* and Jewish groups—arranged by intermediaries like Professor Daniels and Senator Daniel Inouye—led to a compromise, in which "an explanation-jointly authored-distinguishing the Nazi death camps from the American concentration camps be placed at the beginning of the exhibition. In this way the public would be

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further educated and it would be clear to all that no equivalency was intended."

The compromise was unanimously approved by the 24 persons in attendance, and JANM's Karen Ishizuka and two members of the American Jewish Committee drafted a following statement for use in the exhibition. It read, in part:

"A concentration camp is a place where people are imprisoned not because of any crimes they committed, but simply because of who they are. During World War II, America's concentration camps were clearly distinguishable from Nazi Germany's. Nazi camps were places of torture, barbarous medical experiments, and summary executions; some were extermination centers with gas chambers. Six million Jews and many others, including Gypsies, Poles, homosexuals, and political dissidents were slaughtered in the Holocaust... Despite the difference, all had one thing in common: the people in power removed a minority group from the general population and the rest of society let it happen."

Today, it is the policy of many leading *Nikkei* organizations, such as the Japanese American National Museum, the *Nichi Bei Weekly* and the National Japanese American Historical Society, to avoid using euphemistic terms. Though each organization's preferences vary, most favor the following terms: forced removal, expulsion, uprooting, eviction, American concentration camps, incarceration, imprisonment, prisoner, inmates, incarcerees, Temporary Concentration Camps and confinement.

The National Park Service continues to avoid using the term "concentration camp," because some might see it as calling the Japanese American incarceration analogous to Nazi death camps. However, several National Park Service staff members from Manzanar National Historic Site, supported and participated in a panel discussion on "Concentration Camps vs. Relocation Centers, Internees vs. Prisoners," at the 2009 Tule Lake Pilgrimage, which Aiko wrote "augers well for a more enlightened and progressive role by the NPS than in the earlier Ellis Island controversy."

As for Aiko, herself, she is currently completing "Speaking Out for Personal Justice," a publication funded by the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund to be published this fall by the UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, with co-editor, Marjorie Lee, UCLA Asian American Studies Center librarian and archivist. The book will provide names of the more than 750 witnesses who testified before the CWRIC and supplemental material to better understand the Japanese American wartime experience. It will also include summaries of some testimonies presented at the hearings of the CWRIC. [For more information, please go to www.speakingoutforpersonaljustice.com. ✺

"Concentration Camps"

The term "concentration camp" was often used to refer to the facilities holding Japanese Americans during World War II. Some who used this term were:

President Franklin D. Roosevelt (10/20/42, 11/21/44)
President Harry S. Truman (4/59)
Attorney General Francis Biddle (12/03/44)
U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black (12/18/44)
Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes (9/23/46)
Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War (01/06/42)
George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff (07/15/42)
Admiral E. J. King, Commander in Chief of U.S. Fleet (07/15/42)
General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Assistant Chief of Staff (03/28/42)
Governor Nels Smithy of Wyoming (3/42)
Joint Chiefs of Staff (03/09/42)
Vice-Commander Tracy E. Hicks (01/27/42)
Congressman A. J. Eliot from California (02/25/42)
Congressman Leland Ford from California (01/20/42)
Congressman John Rankin from Mississippi (Congressional Record, 12/15/41)
Westbrook Pegler, syndicated columnist (12/09/41)
American Legion, War Council (01/05/42)
Life Magazine (04/06/42)
County Supervisors Association of California (1942)
Pasadena Chamber of Commerce (02/03/42)
San Francisco Chronicle, front page editorial (02/01/42)
Franklin D. Roosevelt (08/10/36) and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox (10/09/40) spoke of places to hold persons of Japanese ancestry in "concentration camps' in the event of war.

Definition of concentration camp:

"A prison camp in which political dissidents, members of minority ethnic group, etc. are confined." Webster's New World Dictionary, 1986.

"A camp where prisoners of war, enemy aliens, and political prisoners are confined." The American Heritage Dictionary, 1983.

Taken from - Due Process: Americans of Japanese Ancestry and the United States Constitution 1787-1994, National Japanese American Historical Society, 1995 ISBN 1-881506-04-5