

# Remembering February 19, 1942: Japanese Americans and World War II

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## Remembering February 19, 1942: Japanese Americans and World War II

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In the United States, February 19 is a day of commemoration that remains too little known. The date is linked to the signing of Executive Order 9066, which moved people of Japanese descent living in the United States to internment or incarceration camps, often located in desolate environments. This US decision launched similar movements in Canada, Mexico, and Latin America, creating a parallel mass expulsion of ethnic Japanese from their homes (Robinson, 2009). This demonstrates the international relevance of the incarceration of people of Japanese heritage during World War II. Specifically in the US, among the 120,000 Japanese Americans relocated, many were children and in their young minds it was an adventure. George Takei wrote about his childhood memories of the camps in his book, "They Called Us Enemy." When his family was sent to the Santa Anita Racetrack, he recalled how fun he thought sleeping in horse stalls was as a young child and how the long train ride after to the isolated Camp Rohwer in Arkansas was full of entertainment and excitement. In reality, he couldn't grasp the injustice of the situation where his parents worked so hard to buy their own house only to be forced into a single, dirty horse stall. His mother also sacrificed her limited luggage with treats and toys for him and his brother, and his father explained to them both that they were going on a vacation rather than prison-like camps. Takei looks back at how his parents' efforts made for two very different journeys, "one, an adventure of discovery," for the children, and "the other, an anxiety-ridden voyage into a fearful unknown" (Takei, 2019, p. 49).

### From innocence to shame

It was only until he grew older and went to public school outside of the camps when Takei's memories of the war shifted from innocence to shame. A schoolteacher called him 'jap boy' and he explained how he understood it was related to his time in camp, saying "I was old enough by then to understand that camp was something like jail...but could not fully grasp what we had done to be sent there. The guilt which surrounded our internment made me feel like I deserved to be called that nasty epithet" (Takei, 2019, p. 170-171). Then when Takei was in high school, he studied civics and government and came to finally realize that the internment was a violation of his rights and unlawfully unjust. The US government had acted with the belief that someone of Japanese ancestry may commit acts of espionage or sabotage against the US, and that these camps would prevent this from occurring. However, there was no evidence of military necessity to support this decision after an extensive government review was conducted by the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC, 1983).

The experiences of Takei and others incarcerated in these internment camps reveal important themes of shame and anger through their memories (Nagata, Kim, Wu, 2019). Oftentimes this also affected the generation that came after the removal decision as well. Nagata, Kim and Wu addressed this subject well by taking a psychological approach to the internment camps and explaining the psychological stresses that came with the incarceration. By using qualitative research through interviews, they found a correlation between feelings of shame and anger with internment camps. The shame led to years of silence in many Japanese American families in an attempt to keep the shame of being interned from their children (Kuramitsu, 1995). For many Issei (first generation Japanese Americans that immigrated to the US) and Nisei (second generation Japanese Americans born in the US) alike, the silence was associated with posttraumatic stress disorder, which was reinforced by the absence of the subject of incarceration in public discourse and textbooks (Nagata, Kim, Wu, 2019). Both articles also discussed the intergenerational trauma

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felt by Japanese American families. A significant impact felt by those incarcerated was the need to parent their children post-incarceration in a way where they would “blend into mainstream society by de-emphasizing Japanese culture and language” (Nagata, Kim, Wu, 2019). Unbeknownst to them, this had psychological consequences for their children as they felt they needed to prove their worth to society and become “super” American (Nagata, Kim, Wu, 2019). Further research disclosed how the low frequency of communication among Japanese American parents due to their feelings of shame and cultural practices of *gaman* (perseverance-suppression of emotions), *enryo* (self-restraint, reserve), and maintaining harmony also affected how race-related trauma presented itself in the intergenerational framework (Nagata, Cheng, 2003). All the arguments overlapped with each other and explained the psychological damage relocation had, not only on the internees but their children as well. To sum it up, George Takei, an actor and activist, powerfully stated, “shame is a cruel thing. It should rest on the perpetrators...but they don’t carry it the way the victims do.”

### Gender and age differences

The trauma attributed to the internment camps are felt differently depending on factors such as gender and age. Nagata, Kim, and Wu explained that men were more likely to hold negative feelings about the internment camps and reported more difficulty with the confinement than women. The majority of those incarcerated were of college age, an important developmental period of identity and worldview formation, and were more likely to have a stronger sense of injustice and stress. Those older and well into their adulthood also reported no positive memories when recalling their internment experiences, with many committing suicide during and after incarceration; this occurred more likely among elderly bachelors. Children internees, aged 7-11 years old, were more likely to recall positive memories of friendships and social activities in the camps, remembering a sense of adventure or anticipation during the relocation (Nagata, Kim, Wu, 2019).

Both my grandparents were among the older children that were incarcerated. This meant they understood the gravity of the situation but were more inclined to recall positive memories. My grandmother, Helen Mukai, was 13 years old when she was forced to relocate and my grandfather, Tom Mukai, was around 16 or 17 years old. They both were held in assembly centers before assignment to their respective internment camps. My grandmother went to Gila River Camp, Arizona, and my grandfather went to Jerome Camp, Arkansas. While at the assembly center, my grandmother recalls being “fortunate” that she didn’t have to stay in the horse stalls like many other Japanese Americans but rather in the new and crudely constructed “housing”. Many Japanese American farmers were allowed to continue working the fields near my grandmother’s assembly center until harvest because the farms needed the workers and to avoid overcrowding in the assembly centers. My grandmother told my father that some nearby Japanese American farmers would see the internees and rolled melons to them around harvest time.

While at the camps, my grandfather and grandmother lived under very different conditions. My grandfather dealt with harsh Arkansas winters where snow would drift underneath the door into their single room. My grandmother endured blistering Arizona summers with no AC. Occasionally she would have to sweep sand out of their room, while my grandfather would have to sweep out the snow. My grandmother said her family separated their cramped room with sheets since she lived with her immediate family of five, other than her brother who was married with a baby. The camps had communal dining and bathrooms, and internees had to endure the weather conditions to get food, use the toilet or take a shower. Both my grandparents went to camp school. My grandmother fondly recalled how she studied late at night or early morning because of a little girl next door that would visit all the time to talk and play with my grandmother. She was no more than 5 or 6 years old. My grandmother enjoyed her company and often wonders where she is now and how she is doing. My grandmother was incarcerated for over three years, and she recalled one field trip in all that time to visit a nearby town. She graduated high school after camp in San Jose, where her family moved to after their release. Although my grandparent’s families never met in camp, my grandfather’s family relocated to Gila River Camp after Jerome Camp closed. He didn’t relocate with his family because he was able to leave the camps early since the war began to draw down. Many Japanese American men were able to leave early but weren’t allowed to move back to the West Coast. He traveled to Chicago, Cleveland, and other cities in search of work. He was interned for a little over 2 years. He graduated high school in camp. It wasn’t until decades later when the US government began making reparations for a decision that is now widely recognized as a major breach of civil rights in American history.

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## Encouraging more meaningful dialogue on histories of racism

The efforts of scholars, artists and activists who report on memories of the internment are encouraging more meaningful dialogues by examining this country's consequential mistakes and preventing the disenfranchisement of other groups of people based solely on racial hysteria.

These perspectives broaden prevalent accounts of the war in the United States by addressing the intergenerational trauma still felt amongst past internees today and their descendants (Nagata & Cheng, 2003). Upon my review, there are clear negative implications attributed to individual or parental wartime incarceration that have been obscured in historical and societal context. Accounts by Japanese American artists and activists, as well as my own reflection of how memories of the war have been shared in my family, further emphasized the gravity the executive decision had on this community.

The memory of the internment, and the trauma that came with it, has often been overlooked. George Takei had to ask his father about the internment camps in order to learn more, since nothing could be found in all his civics and history books. Takei explained, "that remains part of the problem—that we don't know the unpleasant aspects of American history...and therefore we don't learn the lesson those chapters have to teach us. So we repeat them over and over again." Similarly Karen Korematsu, daughter of activist Fred Korematsu, known for resisting the military orders to relocate and taking the case up to the U.S. Supreme Court, hadn't known much about Japanese American incarceration during WWII or her father's role during that time period. This was because her family never spoke about their time in the camps, nor did she learn about it in her schoolbooks. How she found out was through her friend Maya's, another third generation Japanese American, oral book report on Concentration Camps, USA (Korematsu). She was in disbelief when she heard her own last name mentioned. Before knowing, her memories of the war were defined by the discrimination and bullying she experienced for being of Japanese heritage. Now, realizing that her father played such a significant role in American history, she felt empowered through that new memory of that time period and works to make an impact herself. She founded the Fred T. Korematsu Institute to "work with teachers and students to teach about this history and the mistakes we've made" (Korematsu).

Nina Akamu, a Japanese American artist and third generation Japanese American, was also distanced from the traumatic events of the past due to a lack of education about what happened. She lived in Hawaii as a child and had to rely on small visual clues such as bullet holes in the buildings surrounding the harbor, ominous dark shapes of sunken battleships, and spots of oil on the surface of the water (Akamu). As an artist, she was commissioned to create the centerpiece sculpture of the National Japanese American Memorial. To do so, she studied the Japanese experience during WWII, reading history, watching videos, and listening to recordings of Japanese American veterans and internees. Her memories of the war were based off of her family's tragedy and the accounts and memories of others she researched. Akamu used the knowledge she learned about a community that suffered due to war hysteria, a community that she was inherently a part of, to inspire a piece of art that would represent "the internment, injustices and sacrifices suffered by Japanese Americans during the war...and an evocation of strength and a testament to the power of the human spirit" (Akamu).

Like Akamu, my memories of World War II are based on the accounts of my family. Stories of that time period and of wartime incarceration have been shared with me mainly by my father and some through conversations with my grandmother. Unfortunately, my grandfather had passed before I was born, so all of his memories about the war came from my father. However, I would often talk on the phone with my grandmother and hear some of her experiences while interned. She often expressed how unjust the decision was to incarcerate Japanese Americans. She would say they were loyal American citizens and that it was wrong to be denied any judicial proceedings. The sole reason for their incarceration was their Japanese heritage. She expressed that this was their country, yet they were treated as if it wasn't, or worse, as if it didn't matter. It was only recently when I asked about her memories of internment for this paper, that my grandmother broke down in tears. I've never heard my grandmother cry but my specific questions about the war and the internment camps brought on those tears. One painful memory was having to leave her dog behind when they were forced to relocate. This was very difficult for anyone to do. Although she left her dog with neighbors, they wrote that he refused to eat and died shortly after she left him. She believes that it was most likely due to a broken heart. Of all the traumatic experiences my grandmother endured during World War II,

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having to leave her beloved dog is still one of the most painful memories she has some 78 years later. She tried focusing on the positives by discussing how the camps helped her meet many friends from other places and how she is grateful to have received an education while incarcerated. These memories of wartime incarceration gave me a more well-rounded perspective on American history than what formal education has given me.

It's easy for me to think of that time period as one of hate, racism and injustice after hearing my family's experiences. It's also simple to adopt the mindset of victimhood and blame those we believe to be responsible for it. However, my father likes to remind me of a story that my grandfather told about his neighbors at his family's farm. After the executive order was issued, my great grandfather feared that he would be unable to continue paying the mortgage on the farm while incarcerated. Several of his neighboring farmers offered to lease his land and farm equipment. Although they could have just used the land to farm without a lease or my great grandfather's permission until it foreclosed, and nobody would have been the wiser, the neighboring farmers were honorable and thus helped to save the family farm. Unfortunately, even though the farm was safe, unknown vandals burned down the farmhouse. My grandfather was left with very few belongings, other than what he had brought to the camps, as most of it was destroyed in the fire. When his family was released from camp, the neighboring farmers returned all the farm equipment in good condition and my great grandfather rebuilt the farmhouse and returned to farming. My dad likes to use this story as a reminder to me that although there are bad and ignorant people in this world, the vast majority are good.

Karen Korematsu, Nina Akamu, George Takei and both my grandparents are just a few among many Japanese Americans who have gone through something that no one would wish upon another. Their memories of the war and internment will continue to be carried on as they're passed down through each generation. It is filled with pain, sadness, and anger, but also resilience and the hope for a better and brighter future. Like Karen Korematsu and Nina Akamu, George Takei uses his memories of this tragedy to spread awareness of America's past mistakes through his acting and activism. All three individuals work hard to educate others about the Japanese American incarceration camps in order to learn from it. As Korematsu stated, "people tend to have short memories and we need to keep reminding people not to repeat the same mistakes of the past." Amongst the negativity, there are also memories of that period filled with resilience, happiness and community. As long as people hold onto the memories of World War II, the past unjust treatment of Japanese Americans will continue to impact their community today. Although, as time passes and the distance from this time period increases, the memories of the injustice Japanese Americans faced during World War II are at risk of being forgotten. History is bound to repeat itself if the lessons learned by this country at large are not remembered. The targets are constantly moving to fit the hysteria in current political discourse whether it's Mexicans, Syrians, Iranians, North Koreans or the Chinese. Despite the shame, anger, and confusion surrounding memories of Japanese incarceration, it is essential to continue the discussion. Upholding the memories of that time period will hopefully help prevent our country from violating other peoples' rights. This is why Japanese Americans continue to collectively share their memories of a painful past in order to move forward to an optimistic future.

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