

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Remembering the Past

The need to understand the Japanese-American experience during World War Two”

©Susan Platt first published in *Real Change* May 16-29 2002

Laurette Mitsuoka was 22 years old when Executive Order 9066 authorized "relocation" for 120,000 Asian Americans (two-thirds of them were American citizens) on February 19, 1942. She said that at the time her family owned two apartment houses and a hotel that they had remodeled. After they came out of the internment camp in Minidoka, where they lived for two years, they had lost everything. They were given \$25, no food stamps, no housing allowance. She didn't come back to Seattle. Those who did lived in overcrowded hostels and trailer camps. All Japanese Americans (and to an extent all Asian Americans) were subject to severe racism. They had difficulty finding jobs. It was hardest for the elderly who had built their life in America and lost everything, their communities, their self-respect, their economic well-being. By the time the government apologized and gave \$20,000 to each survivor, all of her family had died.

It didn't do them any good.

This is only one of the many personal stories that form a part of the greatest violation of civil liberties in the history of the United States since the acceptance of slavery. Through May 29, the M. Rosetta Hunter Art Gallery is showing "Haunting Questions: Understanding the Japanese-American Experience," an exhibition organized by the Japanese American National Museum and the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy.

The show itself consists of 11 text panels, memorabilia from life at the camps, a woven reed suitcase, a chest of drawers made from orange crate wood, and a few images drawn at the camp. One of the themes of the exhibition is that race prejudice, hysteria, and lack of political leadership were the basis for the incarcerations.

The exhibition comments directly on the similarities between the formation of concentration camps of the 1940s and the detention of Arabs and Arab-Americans since September 11. Surveys posted in the exhibition (without elaboration on the number of people surveyed or when) show that 49 percent of Americans would mandate special identification cards for Arab Americans, 33 percent favor detaining Arab Americans until their loyalty is proven, and 58 percent favor special security checks for Arab Americans.

Some of the themes of the panels in "Haunting Questions" are "Race Prejudice," "Instructions," "Forced Removal" (they were given 48 hours to leave for an unknown destination and for an unspecified amount of time), "Americans Confined," and "The Spirit of Community." As one detainee stated, in a panel quote taken from written account, "We could take only what we could carry so we carried Strength, Dignity, and Soul."

Within the camps, the detainees set up churches, schools, hospitals, newspapers, orphanages. They created social events and made life possible through incredible ingenuity and perseverance. In the exhibition is a violin brought into the camps by one young girl, in lieu of a second suitcase. The panel "Diverse Responses to Incarceration" includes "A Question of Loyalty," which refers to the unbelievable hypocrisy of the government in expecting the incarcerated young men to serve in the United States Army; a group of 315 young man who refused, called the "no no's" were imprisoned and stigmatized by their own community as well as everyone else. Within the Japanese American community there were also many who did everything the government asked, and urged everyone else to likewise in order to prove their loyalty.

"Coming Home: December 17, 1944" refers to the date that the residents of the camp were allowed to return home. It took until 1946 for all 10 camps, located throughout the West and South, to be disbanded. Japanese Americans on the East Coast were not detained, but teenagers who were sent to live with host families in the East or to attend college were often forced to become models of patriotism, to give speeches supporting the United States, and to generally behave in a perfect manner in order to avoid suspicion coming down on their heads. "Coming Home" was not actually returning to a prior home for most Japanese Americans, but a painful reentry into society at the most impoverished level, much like the difficulties of all returning prisoners.

When I asked Norio Mitsuoka (Laurette's husband) why so much property was taken away while the Japanese Americans were in the camps, he said there were many different reasons. Many farmers only leased their land and were allowed to stay just three years, then forced to move on. First-generation Japanese Americans (Issei) were not allowed to own property. Second-generation (Nisei) were allowed to own their land, but, in many cases, they entrusted the property to neighbors and friends. But, even when there were legal contracts, this trust was often betrayed.

"Haunting Questions" launched with a day of programming that included state Representative Kip Tokuda and U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye. Tokuda's father lost two drugstores that he was forced to sell for pennies on the dollar; when he returned after the war, he was not even allowed to enter them. Inouye is from Hawaii where there were, at that time, 10,000 Japanese Americans. They were not interned because of their huge numbers. He served in the military during World War II along with 1,200 men from the camps. It became the most highly decorated unit in the US Army for its size and length of service.

The final panel, "The Legacy of the Camp" states "Let us hold elected officials accountable to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights." This responsibility is getting more urgent with each passing day of the current war on terrorism as the United States is once again stripping a group of people of their civil liberties.

