

House of Representatives
Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship Border
Security and International Law

Hearing on: **the Treatment of Latin Americans of Japanese Descent,
European Americans, and Jewish Refugees During World War II**

Testimony By:

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My name is Libia Yamamoto and I am a former Japanese Peruvian internee.

My father immigrated to Peru in 1914 as a contract laborer from Japan. Through hard work and dedication, my father rose from his humble beginnings to become a successful business person and establish our family as one of the most respected in the Peruvian city of Chiclayo.

While hard work was always a part of my parents' lives, we also had our share of good fortune in Peru. My father owned several businesses: a store on the plantation where we lived and, in the city: a bakery, a tire repair shop, and a noodle making business.

While my father was away on business trips, my mother worked harder than anybody to run the store we had in Chiclayo and to take care of my brother, my sister and me. I always admired her for this.

The period during World War II was very confusing for everyone. Our community began to feel the effects of the war. My siblings and I attended a Japanese school in Peru. One day the principal of the school disappeared, and nobody knew why, how or where. Our entire community was caught in a state of confusion when more Japanese leaders began to disappear. Later on, the Japanese-Spanish bilingual school we attended was taken over by Peruvian authorities; the curriculum changed and all Japanese language courses were removed. Still, I never thought that our family itself would be affected by the war.

I was wrong. On January 6th, 1943, the police came to our house and said to my father, "Mr. Maoki, we have to take you by the order of the United States of America." That day they took him to jail. We did not get any other explanation; they just took him. This came as a surprise – not only to us and other Japanese folks – but to everyone in our community because they knew my parents to be hard working, honest and generous people who meant no harm to anyone. I remember that even the policemen who took my father felt badly about it because they knew him to be an upstanding citizen. Everything happened so suddenly that my father had no time to pack many of his important things.

We knew nothing of his situation until the next morning when my father was moved to the city jail. In the city jail, my father was incarcerated with many other Japanese men of our community. I went with my mother to visit my father there. The whole thing was a very bizarre experience. Seeing my father behind bars seemed completely wrong, and once where nothing had stood between my father and me, now stood bars of steel. Nobody knew what was going on. We didn't know why my father and so many others had been incarcerated, and we didn't know what was going to happen to them. The feeling of powerlessness in this dire situation was overwhelming. All we wanted was our family to be together again, and we didn't know how to make that happen. As you might imagine, when you remove a little girl's father or mother, you take away the foundation of her entire world... and so my entire world felt like it was falling apart indeed.

During this time, the mothers who were there to see their incarcerated husbands held their tears in and tried to be strong... some were more successful than others. Then, a truck came, and the incarcerated men were forced to get on it. At this point, and I will never forget, the men started singing in unison. That truck drove away with my father on it, and we didn't know where they were taking him, why, for how long, or if he'd come back. As my father and the others waved goodbye from inside the truck, I remember the wives lost their composure. A collective weeping erupted and no strength could keep those sad tears from touching the ground.

The mothers who were left behind in Chiclayo bonded together in an effort to console one another during this tough time. They were in limbo, not knowing what to do except to take on the workload responsibilities that the fathers had left behind. My mother had to take care of all the businesses and continue caring for her emotionally fragile children.

This was an extremely traumatic experience for me. I loved my father very much, and was very close to him. I remember that as a very young girl I thought the world of him. Whenever my father would leave for a business trip, he would always tell us where he was going and when he would come back. Most importantly, he would return when he said he would. Before he left on a trip, he would hug me and say, "Be a good girl, and study hard." I remember very well that on the days that my father was scheduled to return, my heart would swell with anticipation. I always knew at what time to expect him, and I would make sure to go meet him at the bus stop. At the first sight of him, I would start running towards him and jump on him. He would catch me and embrace me with a big abrazo (hug). Then he would give me an omiyage (souvenir) he picked up for me on his trip.

Thus, this whole situation was very hard for me understand and clearly was so different from when my father would leave on his business trips. This time around, there was no reassuring hug, no guaranteed date of return. Instead, there was only uncertainty and the unnerving fear that I would never see my father again. I just felt abandoned. Even today, after over sixty years have passed, it is still quite difficult for me to think about that day without crying.

Finally, after an entire month of excruciating mental anguish during which we heard no news of him, we received a letter from my father. The timing was perfect; it came on my sister's birthday: February 13th. He wrote telling us that he was OK and in Panama. For my sister, he enclosed some pressed flowers as a present to her. He apologized for not being there for her or having a gift for her on her birthday but hoped that those pressed flowers would do. That was the best present my sister and the entire family could have had on that day. We were just so happy to hear that he was alive and that he was OK. It was only later on that we found out that he and the others were working digging ditches in a military army camp; many of them were terrified at the idea that they were digging their own graves.

Fortunately, they were not, and my father and the others were taken to Department of Justice camps in Texas. There, their passports and paperwork were confiscated. It is in these camps that my father found out that they were going to be shipped to Japan in a prisoner exchange program. This news terrified my father and the others, and they began protesting because they knew that being sent to Japan would certainly mean separation from their families.

A 'compromise' was reached and the so-called 'solution to this problem' was to reunite these men with their families in Department of Justice camps. I think the U.S. government did not mind this solution because, in effect, it provided more persons for the hostage exchange program with Japan. In most cases after the initial separation of fathers from their families, they were reunited in Crystal City camp. However, there were some families who were never able to reunite. My heart goes out to those who had family members just disappear, never seeing their father, or mother, sister, or brother or other close relatives.

In this respect, I was one of the 'lucky ones.' Somehow, my father was able to communicate to my mother instructions on how to get rid of the inventory from the store, and as I recall she went to work, fast and furious.

Eventually, we would leave everything behind. Most things were sold, but many were simply left as tokens of remembrance to our neighbors. Even in 1995, over fifty years later, when I went back to visit Chiclayo, I was amazed that the people in the neighborhood still remembered what my mother left behind for them, how Mr. and Mrs. Maoki were so generous to leave presents for the people of Chiclayo.

But leaving everything behind was very difficult for my parents. Essentially, they had to give up everything. They were forced to abandon their life's work in Peru, a good social standing in the community, as well as their friends and extended family. I can still remember my mother recounting everything that was left behind and weeping.

We left Peru from the Port of Callao in July of 1943, bringing only what we could carry. Boarding the ships in Callao was horrifying because there were soldiers on those ships pointing their big guns at us. We had never seen guns that close to us, and even worse, pointed at us as if we were horrible people.

The entire trip last 21 days, and we were not allowed to leave our cabins, which were unbearably small and cramped. We were not allowed on deck, so we could not see what was going on outside. Many folks got seasick in the cabins, which made the situation even worse. I especially remember the ship going through a very strong storm, which made almost everybody sick.

When we got to New Orleans, we were finally allowed off the ship. There, officials inspected all the belongings that everybody had brought. My mother had to take my sister to the bathroom, so she told me to look after all our luggage. While my mother was gone, I saw the inspectors go through people's luggage, taking things and throwing

them in the water. The water was full of boxes, memories, and people's valuables. I was frightened at what they were doing. As for myself, I only had one object that was important to me. It was the doll my father had brought me while I was sick at three-years-old. Back in Peru, my mother had told my siblings and me that we could only bring one thing that was ours to the U.S. There was nothing for me to think about. This was the only possession that mattered to me because it represented the love of my father and everything he meant to me. I silently pleaded: "Take anything, just not my doll." My mother was still in the bathroom when the inspectors reached me. To this day, I am not certain as to why, but the inspectors did not throw the doll away, in fact they did not do a very thorough search. Maybe they felt sorry for me, a seven-year old girl guarding her family's luggage with fear in her eyes.

When we finally reached Texas, we expected to see my father, but didn't. We were told that we would see him in one week. I remember when I did see him for the first time and being so happy and hugging him. He had lost a lot of weight. He said he was fine, but he didn't look fine. Even so, we were just so glad to see him. Reuniting with him after such a long time felt so good that the guard towers with the machine guns pointed at us didn't seem that bad. Still, in all our relief, I remember it was made very clear to all of us not to get too close to the fence because we would get shot.

I think that life in the camps was a lot tougher for my parents than it was for us children. Our parents made it so that the children could have as normal a life as possible in the camp. Most of all, being reunited with my father seemed to be enough to help my family get through this difficult time.

At the end of the war, we faced even more trying times. The U.S. government told us to leave the country in which we had been imprisoned against our will. They told us we were "illegal aliens." But how could we be "illegal aliens" when they were the ones who brought us here and confiscated our passports? It was all very frustrating and infuriating. It was like we had no rights; we were treated like we were not even human beings, and they could do with us as they pleased. We could not go back to Peru, as the Peruvian government refused to take back the Japanese folks it had sent to the U.S. There was no choice but to go to Japan. My sister and her family went to Japan first, and we knew things were not bright due to the devastation the war had caused. My sister wrote to us that her family had to pull out weeds from the ground just to feed themselves and little Sumiko, her five-month-old baby, died from malnutrition.

When it was our family's turn to leave, my father became very ill, and our deportation to Japan had to be cancelled. But by this time, the government said that if we could find our own sponsors to stay in the U.S., we could stay. Fortunately, we had relatives in Berkeley who sponsored us. However, we had to pool together our own travel money. My father used what little money he had been fortunate to earn doing underpaid work in the camps. We left camp in 1947. By this time, I had reached twelve-years-old.

Once in Berkeley, we couldn't find a place to stay. But my relatives talked to their church and the church allowed us to use two rooms in the church's basement as bedrooms. We lived there for eleven months. Because my parents didn't speak English, they both had to take whatever job was available to them. For my parents, this whole transition was very, very difficult. They found themselves doing the kind of work that they were not used to doing. In Peru, they had been the ones hiring domestic workers, and now they were doing that work themselves. This made my parents think more and more about everything they had lost in Peru. Not just the financial success, but the prestige and status they held in the community as well.

The transition was very tough for me as well. Because my parents were always working, I had to do all the heavy housework and take care of my younger siblings. So, at the age of twelve, I had to do the family laundry by hand, with a dashboard. My hands weren't very big, and it took a lot of effort and time for me to do it. I also had to change the dirty water I used to wash the laundry, and this was way too much weight for my 12-year-old body.

At school, learning English proved a harrowing task. I vividly remember kids making fun of my imperfect pronunciation, asking me to repeat a word over and over again just because they were amused by the way I said it. I felt like an outsider and was completely mortified.

But we all got through it by working hard. My father always told me that no matter what I did, I should always do my best. He'd say, "Nobody can say anything if you do your very best." This life lesson carried me through adulthood. No matter what I did I always tried to do my best.

As difficult as things were for them during this time, my parents would prepare care packages to send to our relatives in Japan who were less fortunate. My parents always sent them coffee, tea, candy – all kinds of things.

The fall from what our lives had been in Peru to what they became in Berkeley seemed precipitous. We became very poor and struggled all the way through. As a family with five children, it was very rough for all of us. Father was never able to get back what he had accomplished in Peru. He and mother would be stuck doing manual labor until their retirement.

We didn't have a lot of food most of the time. We couldn't have any hamburgers and french fries; we mostly subsisted on noodles and rice with vegetables. We only ate chicken once a week on Sundays. Those days, father received the thigh, my brothers had a drumstick, and mother and I would get a wing.

I, myself, never had new clothes. I was fortunate enough to receive hand-me-downs from the people in the church. The one thing that was always a problem for me was shoes. I was growing up very fast, and sometimes I would go an entire year wearing shoes that were not the adequate size for my feet. I never really had anything new until

I started working when I was in high school. The first thing I did with my first paycheck was buy things for my brothers and buy food for my family. It was really the first time we were able to eat meat other than our Sunday chicken.

I just wonder when reflecting upon all of this... was it really necessary to turn our lives upside down? For ten years, after being forcibly removed from our home country and taken to the United States, we lived as a people without a state, labeled as "illegal aliens." We had been living a good life in Peru, a country that was not involved in the war. So to remove us from our country, where I was born, to bring us to a strange land and force us to live in a concentration camp... I don't know if it was absolutely necessary. We didn't commit any crime, and they would never charge us with anything. We had no trial.

All we are asking for here today is a much needed investigation into our experience and the experiences of so many other Latin Americans of Japanese descent who were also kidnapped from their homes in twelve other Latin American countries. I come here today to ask that you consider this bill that would only bring justice to those who were affected by shedding light on these WWII violations that remain with so many of us today and with this nation.