Nisei Activist Played a Pivotal Role in Redress Movement

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From left: Fred Korematsu, Gordon Hirabayashi, Michi Weglyn, William Hohri, Aiko Herzig Yoshinaga and Harry Ueno in front of the Supreme Court on April 20, 1987, the day the court held a hearing on the National Council on Japanese American Redress' class-action lawsuit against the U.S. government. (Photo by Jack Herzig)

By MARTHA NAKAGAWA, Rafu Contributor

Aiko "Louise" Herzig Yoshinaga, researcher and activist, who played a pivotal role in the national redress movement for Japanese Americans, passed away peacefully on July 18. She would have turned 94 on Aug. 5.

Herzig Yoshinaga was born in Sacramento but grew up in Los Angeles. She was the fifth of six children, born to Sanji "Paul" and Shigeru Kinuwaki Yoshinaga of Kumamoto-ken.

From early on, she showed a talent for the arts, and her parents, although they struggled to make ends meet, allowed her to take dance and piano lessons.

She was a senior at Los Angeles High when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. In February 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, forcing people of Japanese descent into U.S.-style concentration camps, and Herzig Yoshinaga recalled that shortly before she went to camp, the school principal called in the 15 Nisei in her graduating class and told them, “You all don’t deserve to get your high school diplomas because your people bombed Pearl Harbor.”

Herzig Yoshinaga ended up eloping with her Nisei boyfriend, Jacob Miyazaki, so she would end up in the Manzanar War Relocation Authority camp with him. At Manzanar, she lied about her age, got married and gave birth to her first child. Her own family was sent to the Santa Anita Racetrack before being shipped to the Jerome and Rohwer WRA camps in Arkansas.

Journey to Jerome

When Herzig Yoshinaga learned that her father was very ill in Jerome, she was granted permission to transfer to Jerome, but the camp administrator did not allow her husband to accompany her because he was not considered an immediate family member.

Aiko Yoshinaga Herzig in 2018.

Herzig Yoshinaga’s journey from Southern California to Arkansas was not pleasant. The train was occupied mostly by U.S. soldiers, who did not offer her a seat. As a result, she sat on her suitcase while she carried her newborn baby in one hand.

Ten days after Herzig Yoshinaga arrived in Jerome, her father passed away.

When the Jerome camp closed, the family was transferred to the Rohwer camp.

Her older sister, who was born in Japan and thus not a U.S. citizen, was not incarcerated in a camp because she was living in New York, which was not a “military exclusion zone.” However, the older sister was not permitted to attend the father’s funeral in Jerome. It is unclear whether bureaucratic red tape was the reason the sister could not attend the funeral, but she was later allowed to visit her mother and her siblings, who were U.S. citizens.

Once the war was over, Herzig Yoshinaga first went to Denver with her daughter before returning to Southern California. Her husband had been drafted into the Army and was serving overseas.

In Los Angeles, Herzig Yoshinaga's in-laws watched her daughter while she worked part-time and went to school to become a stenotypist. She was turned down for employment several times due to her ethnicity, and at the same time, her marriage started to fall apart and ended in divorce.

She then moved to New York, where her widowed mother and four siblings lived. She found employment with a nonprofit health organization while her mother looked after her daughter.

In New York, she met and married another Nisei, David S. Abe, who was in the Army. She moved with her second husband to Japan, where her husband worked as part of the occupation forces.

In Japan, Herzig Yoshinaga had two more children. However, this marriage also ended in divorce, and Herzig Yoshinaga found herself back in New York as a single mother of three young children.

She found a job as a clerical worker and focused on raising her children. She also enrolled in night school and received her high school diploma from George Washington High School in Manhattan at the age of 25.

Asian Americans for Action

During the 1960s, she was a choir member of the Japanese American United Church in Manhattan, where she met Tak Iijima, who invited her to attend an Asian Americans for Action (AAA) meeting. This organization had been formed in 1969 by two women, Shizuko "Minn" Matsuda and Kazu Iijima. Among other well-known members was Yuri Kochiyama (Mary Nakahara).

Herzig Yoshinaga was blown away by her first AAA meeting. She was excited to be among a group of progressive thinking people, mostly Nisei women, who were committed to fighting for human and civil rights for all people. She overcame her fear of publicly protesting and joined in the AAA marches, particularly against nuclear testing and the Vietnam War.

Around this time, she also found employment with Jazzmobile, a Harlem-based nonprofit group. Well-known jazz musicians, such as Dizzy Gillespie and Herbie Hancock, traveled on a truck through Harlem or the inner city of Washington, D.C. during the summer to introduce children to music.

At Jazzmobile, Herzig Yoshinaga learned first-hand the daily racism that African Americans faced.

After three years with Jazzmobile, Herzig Yoshinaga found employment as a clerk for the board of the United Church for Homeland Ministries of the United Church of Christ. She was disappointed when the church board voted not to divest from South Africa, which was still under apartheid.

During this time, she reconnected with John "Jack" Alois Herzig, a New Jersey-born American of German Irish descent who had served as a paratrooper during the war. The two had met in Japan, but at the time, they had been married to different people.

Herzig Yoshinaga ended up marrying a third time, and in 1978, she moved with Jack to Washington, D.C., where he worked. By this time, Herzig Yoshinaga's three children were all adults, and since Jack's executive salary was enough to support the two of them, she found herself with free time.

Jack, who had been discharged from the Army as a lieutenant colonel, was outraged when he learned about the experiences of the Japanese Americans on the West Coast during the war. He was angry that the government had denied its own citizens freedom and democracy at home while soldiers such as himself and his friends had put their lives on the line, fighting for those very principles overseas.

Earlier in 1976, Michi Nishiura Weglyn had published her book, "Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps," which had been an eye-opener for Herzig Yoshinaga and had sparked her desire to visit the National Archives to learn what the government had on her family.

Soon, she found herself spending her days at the National Archives, doing hours of independent research as she came to the realization that the camp experience encompassed the larger issue of racial discrimination and government misconduct.

NCJAR Lawsuit

In 1979, the National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR) was formed in an effort to organize a national movement to obtain redress for Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated in camp. It was spearheaded by William Hohri of Chicago.

The Herzigs agreed to be NCJAR's Washington, D.C. representatives. They lobbied on behalf of NCJAR, and Aiko took on the enormous responsibility of providing evidentiary material for the class-action lawsuit that sued the government for $27 billion for injuries suffered during the wartime exclusion and incarceration of Japanese Americans. The Herzigs also introduced Hohri to an appropriate Washington, D.C. law firm to take on this task.

At the same time the Herzigs were assisting NCJAR, the government created the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) in 1980. The CWRIC was tasked with studying the mass eviction and imprisonment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast during World War II.

Herzig Yoshinaga was hired to be CWRIC's sole research associate through the recommendation of several people, including Weglyn and Rose Matsui Ochi, who had served on President Carter's Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy.

The Final Report

During her research, Herzig Yoshinaga came upon documents that indicated that in 1943, the government had ordered the destruction of all ten copies of Gen. John DeWitt's original Final Report. The War Department had ordered a revision because the original Final Report indicated that it had been racial bigotry, rather than military necessity, that had put into motion the mass removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans.

Aiko Herzig Yoshinaga and her husband Jack made major contributions to the redress effort.

Herzig Yoshinaga further discovered documents indicating that officials were having a difficult time locating the 10th copy, and she wondered if the 10th had ever been destroyed. It had not.

Herzig Yoshinaga discovered the 10th copy, which provided solid proof that there had been no military necessity to imprison more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry and deprive them of their constitutional rights.

This discovery, coupled with the thousands of documents that Herzig Yoshinaga provided to the CWRIC and the more than 750 testimonies heard before the CWRIC became the basis of “Personal Justice Denied,” published in two volumes in 1982 and 1983.

In “Personal Justice Denied,” the CWRIC concluded that the mass removal and incarceration was not based on military necessity but that these decisions were the result of “race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership.”

The CWRIC’s findings and recommendations laid the groundwork for the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which offered an apology and individual monetary compensation, and the establishment of a public education fund.

The Coram Nobis Cases

In addition, Herzig Yoshinaga’s discovery of the surviving 10th copy of the Final Report and documents uncovered by law professor Peter Irons helped to re-open the wartime Supreme Court Cases of Minoru Yasui, Gordon Hirabayashi and Fred Korematsu. The petitions to reopen the three

cases were filed in 1983, under the writ of error coram nobis, which can only be used if new evidence is uncovered after a defendant had been convicted and had served his time.

The first case to be heard was the Korematsu case, which resulted in a victory with the conviction being vacated in 1983 but not overturned. Only the Supreme Court can overturn its own rulings, and the Korematsu case, as well as the Yasui and Hirabayashi cases, had been filed in the respective U.S. district courts where the original cases had been heard during the war.

More recently, however, on June 26, the Supreme Court upheld President Trump's travel ban but overturned the 1944 Korematsu decision.

Yasui's conviction was also vacated but he filed an appeal to have the government admit to misconduct. Yasui passed away before a decision was made.

In the Hirabayashi case, the Herzigs gave critical testimonies that helped vacate Hirabayashi's conviction of defying the eviction and curfew orders.

Although the redress movement gained momentum from the support from various organizations such as the National Coalition for Redress & Reparations and the Japanese American Citizens League, Herzig Yoshinaga was at the center of critical research needed by NCJAR, the CWRIC and the coram nobis legal team — all of which heavily influenced the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

Administering Redress

Even after the passage of the redress bill, Aiko and Jack continued to give generously of their time and expertise to the public. They counseled hundreds of people on how to access information from the National Archives; read numerous manuscript drafts; acted as consultants to various projects; and made presentations at various universities.

Aiko Herzig Yoshinaga proudly poses with the Jack and Aiko Herzig Papers at a reception celebrating their official unveiling to the public at the UCLA Asian American Studies Center on Oct. 26, 2016. (MARIO G. REYES/Rafu Shimpo)

When the Department of Justice formed the Office of Redress Administration (ORA) to administer reparations to eligible Japanese Americans under the redress bill, the ORA's director, Robert "Bob" Bratt, personally visited the Herzigs' home, requesting their help.

The Herzigs were mainly asked to help in the special verification cases, which were the difficult ORA cases. The Herzigs went through the tedious task of combing through hundreds of documents ranging from prisons, orphanages, mental institutions, railroad companies to the military.

The Herzigs were also consultants to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History's (NMAH) Japanese American exhibit, titled "A More Perfect Union."

The Herzigs are currently referenced in the newest NMAH Japanese American exhibit titled "Righting a Wrong: Japanese Americans and World War II." This exhibit has been extended to Jan. 6, 2019.

During the 1980s, the Herzigs joined in the marches, demanding that the U.S. divest from South Africa, which was under apartheid rule. At one protest rally, the Herzigs were arrested with Amy Carter, the daughter of President Jimmy Carter.

Belated Diploma

In 1989, Herzig Yoshinaga finally received her high school diploma from Los Angeles High, after then-Los Angeles Unified School District Board member Warren Furutani arranged to have a special ceremony for the Nisei Class of 1942, who had been denied their diplomas from Los Angeles High.

Furutani, who is also Herzig Yoshinaga's son-in-law, was later elected to the California Assembly, where he passed a bill, permitting California universities to confer honorary degrees to all Japanese Americans whose education had been interrupted due to the war.

During the late 1990s, protests erupted over inscriptions to be included on the National Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism in Washington, D.C. The Herzigs unsuccessfully spearheaded a petition drive that requested the removal of a quote from wartime Japanese American Citizens League director Mike Masaoka on the monument. The individuals and organizations that signed the petition included Club 100, which is composed of veterans from the 100th Battalion and their descendants.

Other projects the Herzig assisted on included helping Military Intelligence Service veterans compile a list of Nisei who had been enrolled at the MIS Language School. They also helped the 442nd Regimental Combat Team veterans, and for starters, the Herzigs sent the Go For Broke organization some 23,000 names when the group began compiling names for a monument in Los Angeles.

Aiko Herzig Yoshinaga at this year's Day of Remembrance program held in February at the Japanese American National Museum. (MARIO G. REYES/Rafu Shimpo)

In 2012, Herzig Yoshinaga assisted the UCLA Asian American Studies Center process and organize the massive 242 boxes of evidentiary documents that she and her husband had donated to the university. The Herzig papers are now available to the public.

She also authored a publication, “Words Can Lie or Clarify: Terminology of the World War II Incarceration of Japanese Americans,” which discusses the need to stop using euphemisms to describe the camp experience and to use correct language.

In 2011, she co-authored with Marjorie Lee at UCLA “Speaking Out for Personal Justice,” which consists of summaries of the testimonies given before the CWRIC. This publication was funded through the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center.

She is survived by son, David L. Abe; daughters, Lisa Abe (Warren) Furutani and Gerrie Lani Miyazaki; grandchildren, Laurence Toshiro Moore, Sei Malik (Traci) and Joey Tadashi Furutani, Lea Mariko (Grant) Krogmann, Kimberly Tamiko and David Tadashi Abe; great-grandchildren, Kiyomi Pizarro and Harlee Takemi Furutani; brother, John Tsugio (Lucienne) Yoshinaga; sister-in-law, Reiko Yoshinaga; also many relatives.

A Celebration of Life is being planned for August. More information will be announced at a later date.