

**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 Grace Shimizu. I am the director of the Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project and the daughter of a Japanese internee from Peru. On behalf of the former Japanese Latin American internees and our families, I would like to express our appreciation to Chairperson Zoe Lofgren and members of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security and International Law. It is so heartening to be able to share our wartime experiences. This hearing is very significant to us because our experiences have never been part of the mainstream historical narrative of this country, nor have our experiences been included as part of our own community's narratives — both Japanese American and Latino communities. Our story is a hidden part of our community history and a suppressed part of US wartime history.

My father was born in 1906 in Hiroshima, Japan and immigrated to Peru when he was 18 years old. He joined his brother who had arrived earlier as a contract laborer and begun to develop a family business. During World War II, our family charcoal business was put on "La Lista Negra," the blacklist, the informal name for what the US called "The Proclaimed List of Certain Blocked Nationals." This list of "potentially dangerous enemy aliens" affected businesses and individuals, often with no connection to the Axis powers, like journalists, teachers, business owners, priests, or anyone who held a position in the many prefecture clubs or cultural organizations. My family members and others on this list were never charged with a crime. There were no search warrants issued, no hearings held.

When the US transport ships would come into the harbor of Callao, many on the blacklist would go into hiding, my uncle included. The first time the Peruvian authorities came looking for my uncle who headed our family business, they took my cousin instead. My cousin was interned in the US and used in the second prisoner exchange. In 1944, when my father was 38 years old, he was taken by the authorities. He was forcibly deported from his home in Peru to a US military camp in the Panama Canal Zone for detention and put to hard labor, which was in violation of the Geneva Convention. My father never shared his experience in the Panama camp but we do have an interview of another Japanese Peruvian who recalled being put to work clearing the jungle around the camp. One humid day, the internees, many of whom were elderly, were told to dig a pit. He thought that he was digging his own grave. Then they were told to fill the pit with buckets of human waste from the guards' latrines. When the older men were so tired that they could not run fast enough to please the guards, they were poked and shoved by the guards with bayonets. After three months at hard labor, the young man was taken to the US for internment.

My father was detained in the Panama camp for several months. When the next US transport arrived, the prisoners included his first wife, his brother and his brother's wife and children. They were taken to the US for indefinite internment at Crystal City, Texas for the purpose of hostage exchange. During internment, my father's wife died in that Texas camp due to the trauma of imprisonment and lack of adequate medical care. My father also learned that seven other members of our family who remained in Peru had been killed and circumstances surrounding their murders were never resolved.

At the end of the war, my uncle and his family were deported to Japan and dumped off to find their way to the home of my grandmother in Hiroshima. My father was released on parole from camp under the sponsorship of Japanese American relatives living in northern California. His intention was to return to his home, business and surviving relatives in Peru, but he along with other Japanese Peruvians were initially not allowed reentry by the Peruvian government. He eventually remarried and started a family with my mother

in Berkeley, California. In the 1950s, with changes in the immigration laws, he was allowed to change his status from “illegal alien” to legal permanent resident. Despite his decision to live the rest of his life in the US, he never became a US citizen. Part of his thinking was, if the US were ever to violate the rights of persons of Japanese ancestry again, he and his family would not become stateless and would be able to find refuge in the country of his birth.

I didn’t understand the significance of my father’s wartime experience until I began to work with the Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project, which was established in 1991 by six families in the SF Bay Area. Like other Japanese Americans of my generation born in the US, I was lucky to have read about the Japanese American incarceration in a US history book, even if it was just one sentence. And there was never mention about the internment of Japanese Peruvians. Also, my parents and I, like so many other Japanese Americans and Japanese Latin American families at that time, didn’t talk much about the war, internment or the traumatic impact that experience had on us personally, our families and community.

Through our work in the Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project, we are learning how the WWII internment history of Japanese Americans and Japanese Latin is integrally linked. We share many similarities with Japanese American families, including our immigrant roots. We formed community with Japanese Americans while living side by side in Department of Justice internment camps and US Army facilities and being used as human pawns in hostage exchanges. During the resettlement years after the war, Japanese American and Japanese Latin American families in the US struggled to reestablish our lives, with many Japanese Latin Americans becoming part of Japanese American neighborhoods and marrying into Japanese American families.

Through our work, we are learning that our families’ wartime experiences were part of a larger Latin American program whereby the US government went outside its borders to 13 Latin American countries and seized 2264 men, women and children of Japanese ancestry (both citizens and immigrant residents), forcibly transported them to US internment camps without legal extradition, without due process, without charges and deprived of legal counsel.

We are also learning that such wartime experience of civil and human rights violations was not limited to persons of Japanese ancestry. German and Italian communities in the US and Latin America were also swept up in this turmoil. Following the Japanese military attack on Pearl Harbor, over one million immigrants in the German, Italian and Japanese American communities in the US became “enemy aliens” overnight. From about 19 Latin American countries, over 200 persons of Italian ancestry and over 4,000 persons of German ancestry (including 81 Jewish refugees) were seized and deported to the US for internment. In total over 31,000 enemy aliens of German, Italian and Japanese ancestry in the US and from Latin America were apprehended and detained. Many thousands of them were interned for reasons of “national security” in over 50 facilities run by the US Department of Justice and the US Army, which were different from the ten War Relocation Authority camps where Japanese Americans were incarcerated.

We are also learning more about the hostage exchange program. In time of war, civilians from warring nations should be allowed safe passage to their home countries. But what should have been a humanitarian program became a program of human rights violations. Over 4,800 men, women and children were forcibly deported to war zones of the Far East and Europe in the prisoner exchange. These included US citizens who

were the minor children of permanent resident aliens. For persons of German ancestry in the US and from Latin America, there were about six separate exchanges with a total of at least 2,000 people. Of them, it is unclear how many were German Latin Americans. For persons of Japanese ancestry, there were two separate exchanges with over 2,800 civilians, half of whom were Japanese Latin Americans.

It is now widely recognized that the incarceration of 110,000 US citizens and residents of Japanese ancestry during WWII was one of the worst violations of the constitution in our nation's history based on wartime hysteria, racial prejudice and failure of political leadership. With growing knowledge of the WWII Enemy Alien Program and its Latin American component, that mass imprisonment of the Japanese American community is now put into a broader international context of relocation, internment and forced deportation of persons of Japanese, German and Italian ancestry. What is being uncovered is a shocking picture of how the US government initiated and orchestrated a program of massive civil rights violations, crimes against humanity and war crimes spanning two continents before, during and after WWII.

Later review of records of these so-called "dangerous" enemy aliens shows there was often no specific evidence of subversive activities. Rather they lost years of their lives on the basis of "potential" danger. The impact of these violations has been long lasting in our communities and has current day significance for our democratic institutions and freedoms.

We, former internees and our families, are here today to register our plea with you, members of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration. We ask for your support of HR 42, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Latin Americans of Japanese Descent Act, to investigate the treatment of Japanese Latin Americans during WWII.

In 1980, the Congress authorized a similar fact finding study which examined the treatment of Japanese Americans during WWII. During the course of that study, information began to be uncovered about the treatment of the Japanese Latin Americans. Such information was found significant enough to be included in the published Commission report and warrants deeper investigation. The Japanese Latin American commission bill would extend the initial investigation of the 1980 Commission.

We ask your support to get this commission bill passed.

Submitted by Grace Shimizu on March 17, 2009.