

Tule Lake: The Wounds of History Revisited

By The Rev. James Richardson

Two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, more than 120,000 Japanese Americans were forcibly incarcerated by Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942. They were herded onto buses, taking only what they could carry, and shuttled to isolated camps hundreds of miles from their homes.

Entire families were imprisoned — mothers and fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers, aunts and uncles. Most were children. Nearly all were from the West Coast. Two-thirds were U.S. citizens. The largest — and the harshest — of the camps was at Tule Lake in the remote northeast corner of the Diocese of Northern California.

Mindful of the wounds of history still unhealed, diocesan leaders organized a forum on June 7 at Trinity Cathedral, Sacramento, to explore the history and legacy of the camps, particularly Tule Lake. More than 100 people participated in the forum, either in person or online. The forum was moderated by the Very Rev. Cliff Haggenjos, rector of St. John's Episcopal Church, Roseville, and dean of the Central Deanery. The stories were painful to hear — and for the speakers, the parallels with our own time were unmistakable.

The Rev. Canon John E. Kitagawa, the former rector of St. Phillips in the Hills Episcopal Church in Tucson, Ariz., whose parents were imprisoned at Tule Lake, recounted how his family's ordeal still shapes his life. "Because we are quickly losing living memory of our [parent's] incarceration in 1942," Kitagawa said, "I ask you to join me in remembering and honoring those who experienced the humiliation and indignity of forced removal from their homes, communities and churches without a shred of evidence of wrongdoing, and without due process of law."

Fueled by racial hatred and war hysteria, Tule Lake was one of 10 camps for imprisoning Japanese Americans. Built for 15,000 people, it swelled to 19,000 before war's end. Surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers, the camp was constructed on a dry lakebed in the high desert. Dust storms were common in the hot summer, and ice storms in the winter. The imprisoned lived in drafty tarpaper-walled barracks with communal showers and toilets. The camps were known by various euphemisms: internment camps, relocation centers and evacuation camps. More recently, they've come to be called what they were: concentration camps.

Most survivors who are still alive were children at the time, among them Hach Yasumura, who introduced himself during a break at the forum. He briefly told how, when he was 6 years old, he and his family were incarcerated first at the Santa Anita Racetrack in Los Angeles for eight months, and then sent to a camp in Arkansas. "It was a terrible experience," he said.

Kitagawa, who was born after the war, recounted how his parents met at Tule Lake. His mother was a student the University of California, Berkeley, when she forcibly

taken to Tule Lake. She would never return to Berkeley as student. Kitagawa's father, the Rev. Daisuke Kitagawa, was an Episcopal priest and the vicar of a mission for Japanese American farmers near Seattle. Receiving the order to "evacuate," he closed the mission and was sent to Tule Lake a few days later.

"When I think about my father at Tule Lake, I'm always struck by the fact that he had only been a priest for two years and was in his early 30s," Kitagawa said. "I can't imagine being thrust into the chaotic, disorienting and humiliating circumstances he faced." His father soon organized a congregation in the camp, calling it Union Church. "Dad spent much of his time pastoring people of all faiths and no faith."

Others speaking at the June forum included Steve Sasaki, who is a docent at the California History Museum in Sacramento, conducting tours at an exhibit called "Uprooted: An American Story" about the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans. His father was imprisoned at Tule Lake, and his mother in a camp at Poston, Arizona. "It's become a passion of mine to find out more about my family," he said.

As the war continued, young men in the camps who took a loyalty oath were drafted into Army, and many fought in Europe in the storied 442nd regiment. Those who refused to sign on principle were sent to a punitive "segregation" unit at Tule Lake. They were called the "No-No Boys."

The wartime incarcerations had lasting repercussions beyond the Japanese community. The Rev. Ernie Lewis, a priest with the Church of St. Martin in Davis, grew up on a ranch near Fresno. A neighboring ranch was owned by Japanese Americans. When Lewis was 6 years old, his neighbors were sent to one of the camps. His father agreed to tend to his neighbor's ranch and store their belongings in his barn. Word soon got out, and before long, vigilantes began driving by at night, honking horns and flashing lights. Lewis's father slept with a shotgun next to his bed, fearful the vigilantes would burn the barn. They did not. "I was terrified," Lewis remembered. "What I've learned more deeply is there are no 'others.' Just us."

Several speakers at the forum drew parallels between the Japanese American experience and the current federal government push to imprison and deport immigrants and their children. "Behind the ugly rhetoric and policies about Muslim bans and deportation of undocumented immigrants," Kitawaga said, "we hear echoes of what was said about Japanese Americans leading up to FDR's Executive Order 9066."

Congresswoman Doris Matsui, who was a child at the Poston camp, spoke to the conference in a brief recorded message, and struck the same note. "Far too many experience injustice," Matsui said. "We hear it in the rhetoric that seeks to divide us. We see it in policies that marginalize specific communities, and that's why the Japanese American story cannot afford to be lost in time."

Timothy Sōseki Kudō, telling the story of his father, who at age 9, was abducted off a street and incarcerated at the Manzanar camp, put it this way: "Never again is now."

For more stories and information about the Diocese of Northern California's exploration of the Japanese imprisonment in World War II and its aftermath:

<https://www.norcalepiscopal.org/tule-lake-workshop/#toggle-id-2>

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