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Remembering Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga

By James Martin, Kassandra Gutierrez, and Nathanael Gonzalez

Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga—political activist, Japanese American detainee during WWII, and renowned archivist, died on July 18, 2018 at the age of 93. Herzig-Yoshinaga was instrumental in discovering research that would overrule landmark Supreme Court rulings like *Korematsu v. United States*, while providing evidence-based claims that backed racism as the driving force behind the enactment and enforcement of Executive Order 9066. This child of respectable, hard-working parents would become one of the approximately 110,000 targets of forced relocation to camps like the one in Manzanar, California.¹

Early Life and Childhood

Born Aiko Louise Yoshinaga on August 5, 1924 in Sacramento, California, Aiko was the daughter of Japanese immigrants from the island of Kyushu. Herzig-Yoshinaga describes her childhood as a “protected” one, yet she still felt she was better off than most other Japanese families around her.² Her father worked at a vegetable and fruit stand while her mother’s main focus was raising six children and maintaining a household, often sewing clothes together for her children from hand-me-downs. Perhaps the most luxurious aspect of Aiko’s childhood came from her parents allowing her to take up tap dancing and ballet lessons—which she

¹ Thomas Y. Fujita-Rony, “‘Destructive Force’: Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga’s Gendered Labor in the Japanese American Redress Movement,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 24, no. 1 (2003): 40.

² Emiko Omori and Chizuko Omori, “Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, Interview by Emiko and Chizuko Omori,” March 20, 1994. Segment 1.

greatly enjoyed. As her time in the classes progressed, a young Herzig-Yoshinaga discovered that even though her parents were struggling to make their rent payments, they allowed her to continue on with mastering her craft, she expressed that she felt “privileged and spoiled.”³ The encouragement for her artistic undertakings came from her parents – whom she noted as also very musical and talented – and she continued to venture into new areas of the arts, like learning the piano.

Before her internment in the Japanese camps, Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga aspired to be a professional tap-dancer. Living in an era of racial prejudice, her six years of training did not matter as she felt she could not fulfill the image of an American tap-dancer, sharing that she felt she could not be a “Betty Grable” and said she “kidded myself to think if I was good enough a dancer, all those other physical attributes won’t keep me back.”⁴ In 1933, Aiko and her family moved from Sacramento to Los Angeles, where she attended grammar school, middle school, and high school. Herzig-Yoshinaga recalls being at a party in high school when she heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.⁵

World War II and Pearl Harbor

On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor in Hawaii was bombed by Japanese forces, ushering the United States into World War II. Herzig-Yoshinaga describes the prejudice she and other Japanese American were now subjected to, along with German Americans and Italian Americans during this wartime frenzy. In 1942, Japanese immigrants were not allowed to apply for citizenship while the United States was at war with the Empire of Japan; this law was in effect until 1952. Japanese, German, and Italian immigrants were now classified as “enemy aliens,” though many of them had American-born children that were supposed to be protected under the rights of the United States Constitution.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., Segment 2.

⁵ Ibid., Segment 3.

Ideally, high school entails the coming-of-age for youth, when a young girl like Aiko Yoshinaga should only be worried about picking out a dress for her senior prom. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 which ordered the mass migration of Japanese Americans to internment camps in order to protect “against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material...”⁶ As World War II waged on, Herzig-Yoshinaga describes growing up with a certain amount of self-hate because she was not a “blonde Betty Grable.”⁷ Adding insult to injury, her high school principal revoked fifteen high school diplomas from students of Japanese ancestry, including Aiko. Aiko and her fellow classmates were being castigated as a result of racial prejudice during a period of wartime paranoia and hysteria. High school for Herzig-Yoshinaga, and students like her, became a warzone away from the battlefield—Japanese Americans were now fighting a domestic war on the grounds of constitutional infringement.

Life in the Internment Camps

As the executive order was passed, things were only bound to be worse. However, love found a way to prevail through the havoc of anti-Japanese sentiment dominating American society in the early 1940s. Aiko and her boyfriend were to be sent to different camps upon their forced relocation, so they chose to elope and be placed in the same camp as husband and wife. Aiko and her first husband were relocated to Manzanar while the rest of her family was sent to the Santa Anita racetrack. The decision to be sent away with her husband resulted in her estrangement from her father, wherein he “basically disowned me,” Herzig-Yoshinaga said.⁸ When Aiko arrived in Manzanar things were as one would expect of a concentration camp in a desolate location; Aiko describes Manzanar as hot and dusty. The beginnings of her life in the camp

⁶ Exec. Order No. 9066, 3 C.F.R. 1 (1942).

⁷ Emiko and Chizuko, “Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga,” Segment 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Segment 7.

were horrendous, with barely livable conditions which included a mattress made from hay to having minimal water in the barracks, which she describes as hardest on the infants.⁹

Aiko had trouble getting supplies such as toilet paper due to not having money, and the bathrooms in the camps were not private.¹⁰ Her life became one where basic human rights were stripped from her and other detainees; a life where she was living separated from her family and barely getting by. Young love continued to express itself as the detained seventeen-year-old wife became an eighteen-year-old mother the following year, after having to experience her teenage pregnancy in an internment camp. The conditions in the camp combined with her pregnancy made raising her infant difficult. Aiko had a daughter who was born with an allergy to the milk that was given to her at the camp, which resulted in her daughter having stomach defects and failing to thrive. This condition would affect her daughter later in her life.¹¹

Circumstances grew worse as Aiko was in a hot, dusty location without the means to provide for her daughter. Aiko and other parents struggled to find adequate supplies for their children; mail ordering from the likes of Sears-Roebuck and Montgomery Ward was impossible at a time when all workers at the camp were only paid sixteen dollars a month. Aiko recalls the sacrifice with the mail-order system, becoming frustrated with the price of diapers being three dollars at a time when her family was making sixteen dollars monthly at the camp. Disposable diapers were not available, Aiko explains, whereas reusable diapers had to be washed on washboards and hung out to dry, which brought its own set of problems being located in a desert environment plagued with dust storms. Aiko reminds her interviewer of the long-lasting impact of the camp, where “the deprivation of the niceties of life

⁹ Ibid., Segment 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., Segment 14.

¹¹ Ibid., Segment 10.

was something that most of us who had to go through that don't forget."¹²

Aiko did, eventually, find peace with her father right before he died from being ill in a camp in Arkansas—Aiko requested transfer to the Arkansas camp and left with her daughter after her husband was denied a transfer. Shortly after meeting his granddaughter for the first time, Aiko's father passed away and the family was now faced with planning a funeral in an internment camp.¹³ After all the hardships Aiko suffered, from being forcibly removed from her home to her daughter suffering from defects, Aiko was able to persevere and tried to make the most of it as it was all she could do. Life in Manzanar was one of struggle and deprivation, providing little hope for the future.

Political Activism

Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga's young life filled her with motivation to continue striving for social justice for Japanese Americans. The United States government had put her and her family into internment camps. Not only would she get justice for herself but for all the Japanese Americans that had been taken from their homes and placed into camps. Japan bombed Hawaii's Pearl Harbor which forced the US into World War II; therefore, the US blamed the Japanese Americans and placed them in internment camps. She would eventually find a gap of evidence that showed the abuse of power at every level branch of government because doing so violated individual rights under the Constitution.¹⁴ Herzig-Yoshinaga was determined to prove that the US had racial motives for placing Japanese Americans into internment camps.

With her new husband, Jack Herzig, the couple dove into the archives to continue to find ways to subside Washington, D.C. Herzig-Yoshinaga was not an experienced archivist, but her intent was to find proof of misconduct by authorities. She discovered that

¹² Ibid., Segment 11.

¹³ Ibid., Segment 12

¹⁴ Fujita-Rony, "Destructive Force," 46.

the FBI's and other records were restricted, so she went to the National Archives to see what the government had collected during the war and information on her and her family.¹⁵ Herzig-Yoshinaga found that they had kept all school, dental, and medical records of all Japanese Americans placed in the internment camps.¹⁶ Herzig-Yoshinaga applied for a position as a researcher on the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians since she was well versed in the subject matter already. Some documents that Herzig-Yoshinaga found were used in the class-action lawsuit, *NCJAR, William Hohri v. United States*.¹⁷ From that moment on she advocated for redress campaigns; Herzig-Yoshinaga had a hard time finding evidence which implicated the government in wrongdoing, but she persevered.

Executive Order 9066 signed by President Roosevelt due to military decisions aided no justice in the three Supreme Court cases that legitimized the government's right to exclude and incarcerate.¹⁸ Through the writ of *coram nobis*, which allows a person already tried and convicted of a crime to appeal and allow the court to correct based on new evidence and new laws, Herzig-Yoshinaga used a report of the army's racist justification for exclusion and incarceration as basis for filing suit. Eventually, the redress bill did get signed by the House, but at the time the Supreme Court had not concluded on *Hohri* and President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act in August 1988.¹⁹ The goals of the *Hohri v. United States* case were to not only seek financial compensation but to define all the rights that were denied Japanese Americans.

The legacy left behind by Mrs. Herzig-Yoshinaga is one that exudes an unwavering determination to fight for one's beliefs.

¹⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶ Larry Hashima and Glen Kitayama, "Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, Interview by Larry Hashima and Glen Kitayama," *Densho*, University of California, Los Angeles, September 11, 1997, Segment 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., Segment 5.

¹⁸ Fujita-Rony, "Destructive Force," 51.

¹⁹ Hashima and Kitayama, "Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga," Segment 6.

Through the ballet recitals, young motherhood, internment, and political activism, Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga cemented her place in history by fighting for a cause that was bigger than herself—one that attempts to right the malfeasance of Executive Order 9066. There is no question of the heroism that lived within Aiko’s soul; spending a life working to better others is one worth remembering and celebrating.

Annually, CSUSB’s History Club and Phi Alpha Theta host an “alternative spring break” in which students and faculty make the journey to the Manzanar National Historic Site. The group walks the very camp that Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga and many others traveled through 75 years ago, in an effort to preserve memory and further cement the stories of America’s past.

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Author Bio

James Martin is an undergraduate history major at CSUSB, completing his junior year. James' areas of interest include twentieth century America, San Bernardino history, the Armenian Genocide, and studying how racism and masculinity intertwine in the US South after the Civil War. After graduating, James plans to teach history at the high school level and eventually earn his PhD in History. He would like to thank his students and coworkers at Pacific High, the CSUSB History Club, his parents and siblings, his best friend Adriana, and his friends Cris, Cindy, and Matt for their never-ending support and encouragement in his field.

Currently a student at CSUSB, Kassandra Gutierrez will graduate in the spring of 2019 with a Bachelor of Arts in History, with a concentration in US History. She plans to get her teaching credential and become a high school teacher. Eventually she plans to get her Master's degree in Academic Counseling and become an academic advisor at a college. In her free time, she enjoys traveling and camping with family and friends. She would like to thank her professors Dr. Justin Soapes, Dr. Kate Liszka, and Dr. Yvette Saavedra for their contributions to her education.

Nathanael Gonzalez is a senior at CSUSB. He is a History major and his plans after college are to teach English in Japan for a year before attending seminary for his Master's in Biblical Studies. His interests and hobbies include Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Muay Thai, and wrestling. (Martin: left, Gutierrez: center, Gonzalez: right)



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