

Lesson 3: Individuals Making a Difference

Resource Card



*Gift of Yuri Kochiyama,
Japanese American National Museum
(99.1.3)*

Name: Yuri Kochiyama

Lifespan: 1922 -

Home: San Pedro, California, New York, New York.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID THIS PERSON FACE?

Yuri Kochiyama and her family's lives were forever altered after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Kochiyama's father was picked up shortly after the bombing and imprisoned at a federal penitentiary for approximately 45 days. He was released back to the family and died 12 hours after his release. She remembers,

...Never had a war come so close to this country and then eventually, of course, as it became a world war it affected the whole world. Until that time, I was just living a comfortable life, actually a middle class life in San Pedro. I wasn't even aware of the terrible situation for Jews in Europe...By 1941, I had just finished junior college – two years. And as I said, I was not political and I was not socially aware. So it was like an abrupt kind of change when...President Roosevelt declared that all Japanese would have to be evacuated. It certainly changed our life.

HOW DID SHE HANDLE THESE CHALLENGES?

When her husband, Bill, went off to fight in the war with the highly decorated 442nd Regimental Combat Team, Kochiyama wrote to him three times a day for twenty-two months. He would receive so many letters that at times he would bury the letters in the trenches. He grew embarrassed that he would receive so much mail while many other soldiers did not receive anything. He eventually told his wife to start writing letters to other Nisei soldiers. She soon organized a group known as the "Crusaders" so that no one in her husband's team would go without mail. She remembers, "we started out with just five names, but by the time the camps were closed we were writing close to 13,000 soldiers."

While in Arkansas, Yuri Kochiyama came face-to-face with the social problems plaguing the country. She saw a parallel between the ways African Americans were treated in the segregated South and how the Japanese Americans had been incarcerated. She realized that both were the result of the fear and ignorance caused by racism. While she knew it was important

to stand up to racism, she also understood the difficulty of doing so. In her diary while in Arkansas, she wrote, “Courage is something strong within you that brings out the best in a person. Perhaps no one else may know or see, but it’s those hidden things unknown to others, that reveals a person to God and self.”

WHAT IMPACT DID THIS PERSON HAVE?

Upon leaving Arkansas, Kochiyama and her family moved to New York and soon became involved in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. A friend and supporter of Malcolm X, she was immortalized by the *Life* magazine photograph as she held him in her arms as he lay dying.

She supported the Black Panther Party and other national liberation groups, and continues her work today by helping political prisoners and fighting for oppressed people around the world.

What I would say to students or young people today. I just want to give a quote by Franz Fanon. And the quote is, “Each generation must, out of its relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it.”

And I think today part of the mission would be to fight against racism and polarization, learn from each other’s struggle, but also understand national liberation struggles – that ethnic groups need their own space and they need their own leaders. They need their own privacy. But there are enough issues that we could all work together on. And certainly support for political prisoners is one of them. We could all fight together and we must not forget our battle cry is that “They fought for us. Now we must fight for them!”

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Lesson 3: Individuals Making a Difference

Resource Card



Name: Fred Korematsu

Lifespan: 1919 -

Home: Oakland, CA

*Gift of Tsuyako "Sox" Kitashima,
Japanese American National Museum
(98.152.1)*

WHAT CHALLENGES DID THIS PERSON FACE?

Fred Korematsu, a Japanese American, was born and raised in California and was engaged to be married to his Italian American sweetheart; however, because of the laws forbidding mixed race marriages in California, the couple was saving money so that they could get married in Arizona and move east.

In February 1942, Executive Order 9066 ordered all Japanese Americans to report to an assembly center, where they would be temporarily held before being taken to concentration camps away from the coast. Korematsu felt that the order was unjust. He stated, "I figured I'd lived here all my life and I was going to stay here."

HOW DID HE HANDLE THESE CHALLENGES?

Prior to the evacuation order, he had plastic surgery on his eyes and nose in an attempt to disguise his racial identity. According to an FBI agent who questioned him, Korematsu said that he "feared violence should anyone discover that he, a Japanese, was married to an American girl."

In 1942, he was arrested for defying the order excluding all Japanese and Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Even after he was arrested, he refused to plead guilty because he firmly believed that what the government did was wrong. He stated, "It burned me up. I am an American citizen, and to have the government classify me as an enemy alien is wrong."

His case was eventually taken up by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Northern California and was the first to challenge the constitutionality of the exclusion orders. He lost his first trial, was sentenced to five years probation and was sent to join his family at Tanforan Assembly Center. *Korematsu v. United States* reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1944, where the justices upheld Korematsu's conviction by a 6-3 margin.

Almost forty years later in 1983, Korematsu's petition for writ of error *coram nobis* was filed in the U.S. district court in San Francisco. The judge stated that she could not reverse the opinions of the Supreme Court nor could she correct any errors of law made by the justices. However, she granted the petition for writ of error *coram nobis*, thus vacating Korematsu's 1944 conviction.

WHAT IMPACT DID THIS PERSON HAVE?

Although he lost his original Supreme Court case and his Italian American girlfriend, Fred Korematsu is remembered as a hero. By challenging the actions of the government during World War II, he helped pave the way for an official apology from the U.S. government, and the payment of \$20,000 each to thousands of surviving inmates when H.R. 442, the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan.

In 1988, President Bill Clinton awarded Korematsu with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. At the ceremony, President Clinton stated, "In the long history of our country's constant search for justice, some names of ordinary citizens stand for millions of souls — Plessy, Brown, Parks. To that distinguished list today we add the name of Fred Korematsu."

Korematsu hopes the Medal of Freedom will serve as a vivid history lesson and a reminder that discrimination can happen to any American. "It will give recognition that if they ever do try to start anything like that again — they will have to think twice before they do it," he said.

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Resource Card



Name: Ralph Lazo

Lifespan: 1924-1992

Home: Los Angeles, California

*Gift of Helen Ely Brill,
Japanese American National
Museum
(95.93.2A)*

WHAT CHALLENGES DID THIS PERSON FACE?

Ralph Lazo, an American of Mexican and Irish descent, was born and raised in Los Angeles. He angrily watched as his Japanese American friends and their families received orders to be removed from Los Angeles to concentration camps located throughout the interior of the United States. When asked about how he felt at that time, he responded, “It was immoral... it was wrong, and I couldn’t accept it... These people hadn’t done anything that I hadn’t done, except to go to Japanese language school. There were Americans, just like I am.”

At the same time the Japanese Americans were being removed from Los Angeles, people of Mexican descent also faced discrimination. Thousands of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans had been repatriated, or forced out of Los Angeles and sent to Mexico, during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Segregation in schools and discrimination in public facilities was also common.

HOW DID HE HANDLE THESE CHALLENGES?

My Japanese American friends at high school were ordered to evacuate the west coast, so I decided to go along with them. Who can say I haven’t got Japanese blood in me? Who knows what kind of blood runs in my veins?

I cast my lot with the Japanese Americans because I did not believe that my friends of Japanese ancestry were disloyal to the United States.

So Ralph Lazo insisted that he, too, be sent to a concentration camp. After telling his his parents that he was going to a Boy Scout-like camp, he instead took a train and then a bus to join his friends in Manzanar in Central California. It was not until his father read a newspaper article about his son that his family knew of his true whereabouts. They did not attempt to bring him back home.

Lazo is believed to have been the only person of non-Japanese descent without a Japanese American spouse to have voluntarily entered the camps during the war. There he continued his education alongside his Japanese American friends at Manzanar High School. He was later drafted out of Manzanar and won a bronze star in the Philippines for heroism in combat.

WHAT IMPACT DID THIS PERSON HAVE?

Ralph Lazo is an example of a non-Japanese American during World War II who did not believe what the United States Government was doing to people of Japanese ancestry was right. By joining his friends in Manzanar, he helped keep their spirits up and refused to turn his back on them.

After the war, many considered him a traitor: “a Jap, just like his Jap friends.” But his response was always the same: “I knew right from wrong... I’m one-eighth Irish. Sometimes it shows.”

Forty years later, when asked about his experience in camp he said,

Please write about the injustice of the evacuation. This is the real issue. Ralph Lazo is just a consequence... This is a very personal thing. No books are going to be written. No pictures are going to be made. I’m a very quiet, private person. I blend in real well with my Nisei [second generation Japanese American] friends.

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