

Chicagoan looks back on concentration camps for Japanese-Americans



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Roy Wesley. Photo by Gretchen Rachel Hammond



Roy Wesley (right) with husband, Mark Weber. Photo courtesy of We

“Do not rely on following the degree of understanding that you have discovered, but simply think, ‘This is not enough.’” —Yamamoto Tsunemoto, Hagakure Kikigaki: The Book of the Samurai.

Roy Wesley is on a quest.

On the day he was born in 1942, his parents and grandparents had been ordered to relinquish all their property and report immediately to a concentration camp. There was no due process. No one spoke up in their defense. There were no signs of protest from those being loaded onto trains for transportation or their neighbors.

They were not living in Nazi-occupied Europe, but Portland, Oregon.

Wesley spent the first two years of his life in detention with almost 127,000 of his fellow Japanese-Americans.

From the moment Wesley rose to greet Windy City Times from the equally unassuming corner of an Uptown restaurant, the character in both phrasing and timbre of this openly gay musician and biologist was one of elegant tenderness.

“That’s actually a good starting point,” he suggested with a smile after he spelled out his name. “Being a Japanese American, how did I end up with an English name?”

The answer can be found within the footprints of a journey which began in 1890.

Wesley has set out to uncover them and, through the book he is writing, bequeath them to the future as lessons which, as xenophobic nationalism returns in force to America, can help extinguish it through historical and cultural literacy.

The seeds of Wesley's family are planted in a work ethic fashioned through the arduous, ceaseless labor at the rice paddies boxed across the prefectures of Southeast Japan and the fearless heart of the Uyesugi clan of Samurai warriors.

When his grandfather Kojiro arrived in Seattle at the close of the 19th century, he and eventually his Japanese wife needed both the work ethic and the heart to prevail.

"He worked very hard to make a living on the railroads in California and in the lumber mills of Oregon," Wesley said. "The mill was in Westport, along the Columbia River. There were 125 Japanese immigrants working there. They were very isolated as a community. There was a camp of cabins set up, surrounded by the forest and that's where my father was born."

It was October 1917. Wesley's father was named Newton (after Sir Isaac).

Although their playground was both breathtaking in its beauty and, according to Wesley, not so far removed from his grandfather's Japanese birthplace, Newton and his four younger siblings quickly learned survival skills such as swimming, hunting and fishing, while Kojiro worked two shifts at the mill until he was able to save enough money with which to buy a farm.

"When it came to farming, my grandfather ran into prejudice because Japanese farmers worked very hard and the crops they sold at market made them an economic threat," Wesley said. "But there was always an undercurrent of racial prejudice and discrimination that was fueled by the press and the government itself."

Asian Exclusion was built into the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act which was signed into law by President Calvin Coolidge.

It put a halt to Japanese immigration and denied citizenship to Japanese residents. The Act was born out of "Yellow Peril," which was a term historians believe was first used by German Kaiser Wilhelm II and was picked up by American newspapers.

In the late 1800s, it was the likes of New York Tribune founder and politician Horace Greeley who claimed that Asians were "uncivilized, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception without any of the higher domestic or social relations."

Like Trump's now-infamous charge against Latinos that "they're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime," the unsubstantiated rhetoric was swallowed hook, line and sinker by white, blue-collar communities who were whipped up into a hateful charge against immigrants through a perceived menace of lost jobs waved in front of them by political and social matadors in search of money and power.

Instead of Latinos and Muslims, "Yellow Peril" placed people from countries in what the Johnson-Reed Act called the "Asiatic Barred Zone" in the crosshairs of demonization and the resulting physical attack then by white communities in the Western United States. Japanese immigrants (called Issei) were denied even basic civil rights.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, Yellow Peril reached its zenith. Wesley's older brother was born two days afterward.

Lieutenant General John Lesesne DeWitt, then in charge of Western Defense Command, stated that, "The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become 'Americanized,' the racial strains are undiluted."

By then, Newton (termed a U.S.-born Nisei) had built a successful life as an optometrist and was an active community church member. It was at a church social event in 1927 that he met Cecilia Sasaki, the daughter of two accomplished musicians. He eventually married her after a three-year courtship.

Newton also changed his last name to Wesley after the founder of the Methodist Church to which his parents had converted. Wesley noted that, despite his grandparent's objections, Newton made the decision as a businessman.

"Uyesegi was not only difficult to spell or pronounce, but my father was an optometrist and nobody would ever be able to find him," Wesley said. "My grandparents wondered why he would want to change something that had been a proud family name for thousands of years. They finally accepted it because of what happened in the war."

For almost his entire upbringing, the years between 1942 and 1945 were never discussed among Wesley's family—something he said was "not unusual for all Japanese families. There was a shame associated with it so nobody ever wanted to bring it up."

The family kept its silence for nearly four decades. In 1980, Congress established the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC). Public hearings were held in cities across the United States (including Chicago). Japanese families were finally given a voice as they recalled their experiences and

sought redress.

“That was the big opening,” Wesley said. “Then certainly George Takei’s influence as a Hollywood star has helped that effort so that people are more aware of it now than ever before.”

As Wesley described the years between 1942 and 1945 to Windy City Times, his amiable, matter-of-fact tone was tinged with sadness and resentment.

“Many Japanese now call them concentration camps,” he said. “Because, in the technical sense of the word, that’s what they were and that’s even what Roosevelt called them.”

Following Pearl Harbor, with the support of particularly West Coast congressmen, DeWitt recommended “the establishment of board civil control, anti-sabotage and counter-espionage measures” against Japanese communities in the United States despite the 1941 Munson Report authored by the State Department which concluded that, “There is no Japanese ‘problem’ on the Coast. There will be no armed uprising of Japanese.”

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Presidential Proclamation 2537 on Jan. 14, 1942, which forced Japanese aliens to register with the Department of Defense as “Aliens of Enemy Nationality.” Their assets were frozen and movements restricted.

Less than a month later, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which began the evacuation and internment of over 120,000 Japanese people on the West Coast.

“My father had to lose his optometry practice, my grandfather had to sell several hotels and his grocery store in Portland, Oregon,” Wesley said. “Everything that they worked for was sold for ten cents on the dollar. Farmers had to give up their properties to a land grab by greedy neighbors. The family had to decide what they were going to take to the camp. They could only bring whatever they could carry by hand.”

With the concentration camps still under construction, Wesley’s family were initially sent to a hastily organized detention center at the Portland International Exhibition Stockyards.

On the same day they were supposed to leave, Cecilia gave birth to Wesley. She was allowed three days in the hospital to recover before being transported to the stockyards along with her infant son.

“We were housed where the animals used to be,” Wesley said. “The stalls were already there so plywood floors were put down and [canvas] was draped over the top.”

The average size of the stalls given to families was 20 by 14 feet.

“There was still a lot of manure under the plywood floors,” Wesley said. “In the Spring, there were thousands of flies. So, the government issued strips of fly-paper which hardly helped. Sanitation was terrible and people were getting sick.”

As a community leader and president of the Portland, Oregon Japanese-American Citizen League, Newton was assigned to the camp’s Administrative Board.

“A lot of the Japanese in the camp thought that the Citizen League was in collusion with the government,” Wesley said. “It wasn’t true but there was a resentment and my father didn’t want to stay in that environment. A number of schools in the country were trying to help Japanese-Americans get away from the West Coast.”

One of them was Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana.

“My father applied to continue his education there,” Wesley said. “The Governor of Oregon and the Mayor of Portland wrote letters of support and so, after five months, he and my Uncle were released to go to Earlham to study. That left my grandparents, mom, brother and me in the camp.”

A month after Newton left, the family was transported by train to what was then a desert off the Snake River in Minidoka, Idaho. The camp there was opened on Aug. 10, 1942 and held 9,397 Japanese-Americans.

As described, by the Minidoka Internment National Historic Site, the camp “had 35 residential blocks, each of which consisted of 12 sleeping quarters. All of these blocks included a central H shaped building, where residents could shower and do their laundry. Although the 946-acre camp mirrored a fully functioning town, the five miles of barbed wire fencing, eight watchtowers, and the overall military presence separated the Minidoka Relocation Center from neighboring communities.”

“Life was extremely difficult,” Wesley said. “In the Winter, the temperature would go down to minus-20 degrees. We had one pot-belly stove in each 10’ by 10’ square room-per-family. When the snow and ice thawed, the whole camp area turned into mud. When you tried to get from one place to another, you were immersed in it. In the Summer the temperature was unbearably hot. The winds would send sand sweeping through the camp. I was a baby and I couldn’t crawl on the floor because it was just bare wood with a lot of splinters.”

“Food was basically K-rations,” he added. “Spam mainly, sometimes hot dogs. Rice was available. Families couldn’t eat together. Men ate with men, women with women and they had different eating hours. It was a way of demeaning people and keeping them in line.”

He showed Windy City Times pictures taken of Cecilia, himself and his brother in the camp. “I was amazed she got these because internees were not allowed cameras,” he said. “Everything had to be done by the internees. Because many of them were farmers, they ran irrigation channels from the river into the desert. It was the beginning of agriculture in that area and, today, it is a flourishing industry.”

Wesley described life for a mother trying to raise two children in Minidoka as one “with no dignity. The disruption of family life changed people. They became very depressed. Men became alcoholics afterwards because they lost the sense of pride in themselves. They were angry and frustrated.”

However, extraordinarily, that anger was not directed towards the government that had imprisoned them.

“The Japanese mentality is very internalized,” Wesley said. “It’s more, ‘What did I do wrong?’ They were ashamed thinking they were the ones who started the war and so had to bear the brunt of it. Millions of people were killed during the fire bombings of Japan and when the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki but, again, feelings were internalized even though there was so much grief because of the family connections.”

Minidoka was closed Oct. 28, 1945.

Wesley’s grandparents remained there the entire time. Cecilia and the children were able to leave in February 1944 after their father, who was working at an optometry school in Chicago, negotiated their release.

Two students in Newton’s class began researching the idea of more comfortable contact lenses. Suffering from his own degenerative ocular disease which was relieved only by uncomfortable lenses that could only be worn for an hour-per-day, Newton engaged the students to work with him. After three years, they succeeded and developed the first contact lenses to be mass marketed and sold nationwide.

“By 1955, he had the largest contact lens business in the United States,” Wesley said. “He was always so busy and gone a lot of the time, so I really didn’t get to know him. It was very hard on my mom who just wanted the family to be together.”

From the age of five, Wesley was coming to terms with his own sexuality. He never told his mother, who passed away in 1973.

Inspired by composers such as Leonard Bernstein, Wesley displayed an extraordinary aptitude as a pianist. However, in college, he majored in comparative literature and science. He completed his education with a Ph.D. from CUNY in molecular biology.

It was there that he met and married his wife. “It’s funny how you follow the course of your life because that’s what society dictates,” Wesley said. “But you are still left unsatisfied and still longing for the truth inside you. I told my ex-wife before we got married that I liked men but she thought I could change. But you can’t hide forever.”

The couple had two children in the 15 years they were together.

Wesley spent a decade working with his father at his foundation in Chicago.

It was at an Evanston gymnasium that Wesley met and fell in love with Mark Weber. “My wife took it very hard,” he said his voice trembling with emotion. “She wanted to keep the family together but I had imprisoned myself by covering up my feelings.”

Wesley has remained with Mark, now his husband, ever since.

The decision to write about Newton’s life immersed Wesley in his family’s immigrant story and their own imprisonment in 1942.

“I never got to know my father in the way that I wanted,” Wesley asserted. “He died five years ago, but I decided to write his biography on his 100th birthday as a way of coming to grips with who my dad was as a person. He was never going to be the loving, caring person I created in my mind. You have to confront that truth. Your life can be so much richer if you uncover the things in the past that inform who you are today.”

That discovery and the understanding which followed changed Wesley’s life.

“I have had a profound sense of sorrow for what everybody went through in detention,” he added. “I went back to the Portland stockyards on this beautiful, quiet, sunny morning and I just listened. I could hear the anguish of the voices reaching from the past.”

The nationalistic rhetoric of the 2016 election, the fears drawn upon and manipulated by Trump and the decisions that have been made since Jan. 20, 2017 have forced Wesley to wonder whether the United States has at all learned from the lessons history tried to teach it 75 years ago.

“It’s painful to think about the disruption of lives and the impact of someone blithely signing an order which excludes and displaces people,” he said. “You think about all these people who are living in a terrible state of limbo and could be destroyed when ICE finds them and they have to leave everything they have worked for behind. It’s unconscionable and awful to watch.”

However, for Wesley, there is one difference between current events and the Japanese experience in 1942 and it gives him hope.

“There’s a huge population which is supporting resistance,” he said. “They are making enough noise that maybe things can move forward differently. Back then, there were posters for hunting licenses which said that it was ‘OK to kill a Jap.’ But if we don’t take the lessons of history seriously, everything will be diminished over time. The strength of our country has always been other ideas, cultures, new ways of looking at things. To all live in the same mold could be the end of the great experiment in democracy.”