

San Francisco

On 75th Anniversary Of Executive Order 9066, Japantown Community Tells Stories Of Internment

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Members of the Japanese American community call for resistance in light of Trump's immigration orders. | Photo: Nikki Collister/Hoodline



by **Nikki Collister** | [@ncollister](#) | [website](#)

February 20, 2017

Nobuo "Nob" Mihara was 10 years old when his father told him that his family would have to leave their home in San Francisco.

He remembers his teacher telling him goodbye on his last day of school, in April 1942. "I don't know what she did the rest of the school year, because almost all of my classmates were Japanese-American, too."

Mihara, whose family runs local origami store [Paper Tree](#), has lived in San Francisco for his entire life—apart from the years during and immediately after World War II, when his family was interned at Heart Mountain Relocation Center in northwest Wyoming.

They were among the roughly 5,000 San Francisco residents affected by [Executive Order 9066](#), signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Yesterday marked its 75th anniversary.

The order, which authorized the U.S. government to "prescribe military areas ... from which any or all persons may be excluded," initiated the forced evacuation of more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry living along the West Coast.





Japanese-American San Franciscans board buses for the Tanforan Assembly Center, at 2031 Bush Street. | PHOTO: DOROTHEA LANGE, COURTESY OF THE [NATIONAL ARCHIVES](#)

A community uprooted

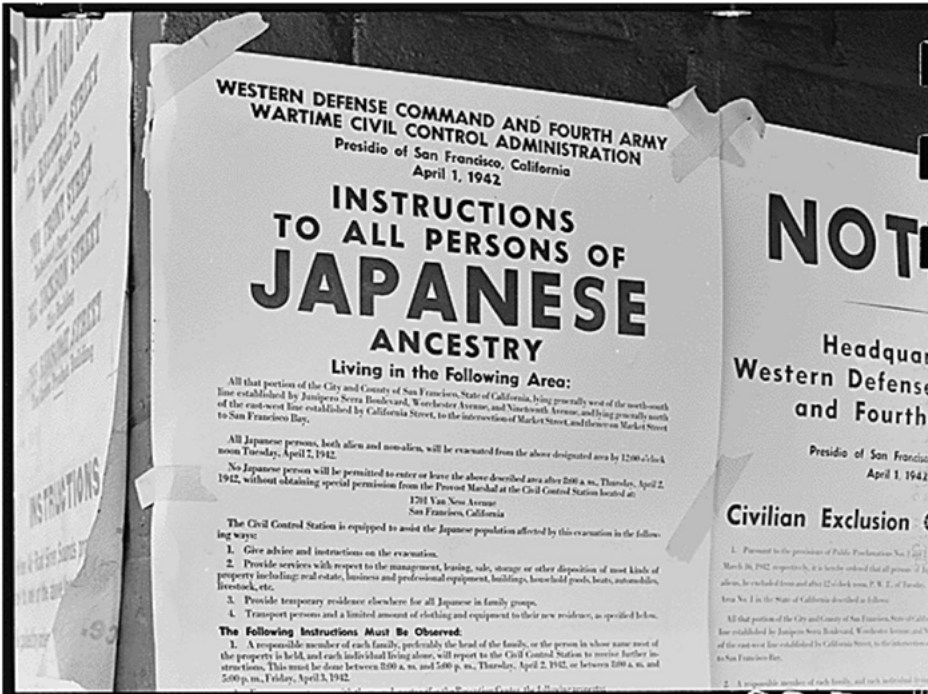
Mihara was one of several hundred members of the Japantown community who gathered for yesterday's annual [Bay Area Day of Remembrance](#).

Although the number of surviving internees gets smaller each year, there are still a handful of San Franciscans who can recall childhoods and teenage years spent in internment. For many of them, the memories of fear and tension before and after the war are just as poignant as the experience of internment itself.

"People would shoot guns at our houses," remembers 86-year-old San Francisco resident Harumi Serata, who spoke with Hoodline about her experience as an 11-year-old girl living in Tacoma, Washington after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

In the months after Pearl Harbor, Serata's family was one of many interrogated by the FBI. "Some families started to burn all of their belongings [to avoid imprisonment]. My father didn't. He practiced the Japanese sport judo, which was seen as dangerous."

Serata's father was detained by the FBI after Pearl Harbor and sent to Fort Missoula, Montana, while Serata and the rest of her family were sent to Minidoka Internment Camp in Idaho.



Exclusion order posted at First and Front streets in San Francisco. | PHOTO: DOROTHEA LANGE, COURTESY OF THE [NATIONAL ARCHIVES](#)

San Francisco's Japantown had grown into a flourishing community throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but it was all but destroyed by Executive Order 9066. Citizens of Japanese descent were given less than a month to close their businesses, sell their property, and pack what they could fit into one suitcase.

Business owners, like Dave Tatsuno of [Nichi Bei Bussan](#) department store, were forced to hold "evacuation sales," unsure whether to cite temporary or permanent closure.

By May 1942, the once-thriving Japanese community in the heart of San Francisco spanned 30 blocks of empty storefronts and shuttered windows.

Asked whether there were feelings of resistance or resentment among the Japanese community at the time, Nob Mihara shook his head, citing a phrase commonly heard among Japanese-American families in that era: "Shikata ga nai"—"it can't be helped."



Shojiro and Dave Tatsuno in front of their store, Nichi Bei Bussan, at Post and Buchanan. | PHOTO: DOROTHEA LANGE, COURTESY OF THE [NATIONAL ARCHIVES](#)

Life during internment

"People ask why there wasn't more resistance," says Sheridan Tatsuno, Dave's son. "But when there are men with guns telling you to get in a bus, close the blinds and don't look out, you do what they say."

During the early days of internment in 1942, a majority of San Francisco evacuees were taken to Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno while construction of the internment camps was finished. At Tanforan, a former racetrack, they were housed in hastily converted horse stalls and barracks, before being relocated to one of 10 American internment camps in "the interior": remote places like Poston, Arizona or Topaz, Utah.

Before boarding the bus for Tanforan, Dave Tatsuno left his 8mm camera with a friend in Oakland. Once his family was moved to Utah's Topaz Relocation Center, Tatsuno became friends with his supervisor at the War Relocation Authority Co-op, who arranged for the camera to be secretly mailed to the internment camp, bypassing security.

Once he had his camera, Tatsuno was able to film a collection of home videos depicting life during internment. The resulting film, entitled *Topaz*, was added to the Library of Congress' National Film Registry in 1997, as a film of "historical, cultural and aesthetic significance." (It's one of only two home movies on the registry; the other is Abraham Zapruder's film of John F. Kennedy's assassination.)



Excerpts from Dave Tatsuno's film 'Topaz.'

Rebuilding after the war

The average internee spent three and a half years behind barbed wire during World War II. But even after the war ended in 1945, feelings of animosity were still strong on the West Coast, causing many local Japanese-Americans to delay their return to San Francisco. Nob Mihara's family lived in Salt Lake City for three years after the war, while Harumi Serata's family settled on a farm in Idaho.

Even after they returned to Japantown, many residents were forced to start all over again. "Some of us who owned properties had boarded everything up in the basements [before leaving]," says Mihara. "But when we came back after the war, it was all gone."

The Tatsuno family was one of the lucky few to retain ownership of their store, and Nichi Bei Bussan reopened shortly after the war. Nob Mihara's father opened a book publishing company in the 1950s, and the family expanded its Japantown presence by opening a retail store, now known as Paper Tree. Along with neighboring [Benkyodo](#), [Soko Hardware](#), and [Yasukochi's Sweet Shop](#), Paper Tree is one of the few remaining family-run businesses whose Japantown roots extend over 100 years.



Nob Mihara (left) with wife Shiz and daughters Vicky and Linda at their origami shop, Paper Tree. | PHOTO: NIKKI COLLISTER/HOODLINE

For Harumi Serata, who came to San Francisco after the war, neighborhood community groups have provided a way to connect with others and process the experience.

Serata has been part of the Senior Women's Writing Group at the [Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California](#) for 19 years, and her memoirs, along with those of several other Bay Area Japanese-Americans, appear in two published books: [From Our Side of the Fence](#) and [Making Home From War](#).

Today, San Francisco's Japantown is one of only three remaining in the United States. And although it has diminished in size from 30 blocks to just four, the community is determined to remember its past.

Remembrance and resistance

Attendance at this weekend's Bay Area Day of Remembrance was at an all-time high.

"We have Trump to thank for that," says Peter Yamamoto, volunteer at the [National Japanese American Historical Society](#) (NJAHS). "Now people want to know the history."

Speakers at the event drew parallels between Executive Order 9066 and President Trump's immigration policies, noting that both used fear and the disguise of "military necessity" to target American citizens based on their race or religion.



Candle-lighting ceremony at the Bay Area Day of Remembrance. | PHOTO: FACEBOOK

"Today's executive order brings back the fear and anxiety felt by Japanese-Americans during the war," said Sameena Usman of the Council on American Islamic-Relations (CAIR), describing the [spike in hate crimes against Bay Area Muslims](#) since the election.

Keynote speaker Don Tamaki, who was a member of the legal team that re-opened the U.S. Supreme Court case of civil rights activist Fred Korematsu, stressed the importance of educating others about the "stain" of Japanese internment in American history.

Unlike in 1942, "we can blog, we can take to social media to inform others, we can support political campaigns," Tamaki told the audience. "Most importantly, we can vote."

The Day of Remembrance turned into a Day of Resistance, with Tamaki and Assemblymember Phil Ting calling for action among the Japanese-American community. "We have to make sure this never happens again," Ting told the audience. "None of us can live free unless all of us live free."

Commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the signing of Executive Order 9066 continues this weekend, with New People Cinema hosting its sixth annual [Films of Remembrance](#) event in Japantown:



Sixth Annual Films of Remembrance

WHEN Feb. 25, 10:30am-8pm

WHERE New People Cinema

This annual event showcases films focusing on the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Neighborhoods [Japantown](#)

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RBR · 4 years ago
 This in-depth article provides an invaluable service. Thank you all for sharing your first-person accounts.
 3 ^ | v · Reply · Share

T C · 4 years ago
 The five Japanese-owned businesses named in this article should automatically be awarded Legacy Business status by SF government without application fees and additional bureaucracy. Which supervisorial district is Japan Center in?
 1 ^ | v · Reply · Share

cowsaysmeow → T C · 4 years ago
 District 5, London Breed.
 ^ | v · Reply · Share

Do Something Nice · 4 years ago
 According to what I read on SFGate last week, executive order 9066 allowed the US to go to Latin American countries, kidnap citizens of Japanese heritage from those countries to be used to negotiate 'prisoner exchanges; with the Japanese.

https://youtu.be/EV-G7Jq_xbc

Also another San Franciscan, Frank Korematsu challenged 9066 all the way to the Supreme Court. They ruled against him.
 1 ^ | v · Reply · Share



runnz63 · 4 years ago · edited

Comparing a travel ban to internment. Ridiculous.

2 ^ | v 2 · Reply · Share ·



roymeo → runnz63 · 4 years ago · edited

Yeah, the story is interesting, but the clear attempt at politicization is unfortunate.

By the way, some context, most European nations placed significant restrictions on the movements of German residents during WW2.

And in all cases, it was waaaaay better than being American, English or Jewish in Nazi-controlled Europe. While the stories of how Japan treated our POW's are legendary in their gruesomeness.

2 ^ | v 2 · Reply · Share ·



Guest → roymeo · 4 years ago · edited

The point, since you seem to have missed it, is that the U.S. is supposed to be "better" than all the countries you mentioned. Saying the internment of Japanese-Americans wasn't as bad as the Holocaust isn't really saying a whole lot.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ·



roymeo → Guest · 4 years ago

But it might be more understandable in a global context if we see that the same thing happened all over the globe, at that time. It's easy to take shots at historic events from a modern ethical perspective but it was a different world back then. If you had been alive during WW2, you'd have probably been fine with it

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ·



Kevin Smith → Guest · 4 years ago · edited

Say that to the Jew's who were gassed in the ovens or the American POW's who were dissected alive in Japan. I say there is a HUGE lot.

^ | v · Reply · Share ·



SFNB · 3 years ago

Thanks for this article. The photos and the video of Topaz make these stories very real. It's important to acknowledge and remember the suffering of our fellow San Franciscans and all Americans who were displaced and interned because of Executive Order 9066.

^ | v · Reply · Share ·



Kevin Smith · 4 years ago · edited

How does the internment of citizens equate to the ban on travel, to here, of aliens ? It does not. Talk about a huge burning STRAW MAN.

^ | v · Reply · Share ·



Max Wechsler · 4 years ago

Great article. Thank you.

^ | v · Reply · Share ·



A.d. Jacobs · 4 years ago

The rest of the story: 1.

H.Res.143 — 115th Congress (2017-2018)

Recognizing the significance of the 75th anniversary of the signing of Executive Order 9066 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and supporting the goals of the Japanese American, German American, and Italian American communities in recognizing a National Day of Remembrance to increase public awareness of the events surrounding the restriction, exclusion, and incarceration of individuals and families during World War II.

Sponsor: Rep. Takano, Mark [D-CA-41] (Introduced 02/16/2017) Cosponsors: (23)

By the way EO 9066 applied to "any and all persons".

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