Foreword

“Let Us Now Praise Famous Men”

FRANK CHIN

James Omura is famous for going before a congressional committee in 1942 and asking, “Has the Gestapo come to America? Have we not risen in righteous anger at Hitler’s mistreatment of the Jews? Then, is it not incongruous that citizen Americans of Japanese descent should be similarly mistreated and persecuted?”

Omura was talking about the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). James Matsumoto Omura was born in 1912 on Bainbridge Island in the state of Washington. He carved himself out a career as a journalist writing for, then editing, then owning and publishing English-language Japanese American newspapers and magazines from Seattle to Los Angeles.

He had a special interest in Nisei arts and ideas, and encouraged Nisei intellectuals to essay their thoughts on the being, meaning, and future of Japanese in America, and Japanese Americans. His magazine *Current Life* was distinguished by the quality and variety of the writing. *Current Life* won the admiration and support of Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Saroyan. Virtually all the prewar Nisei poets and writers and thinkers, including Toshio Mori, Ferris Takahashi, Hisaye Yamamoto, and Toyo Suyemoto, were nurtured in *Current Life* and other publications Omura edited.

It was as the publisher and editor of *Current Life* that James Omura appeared before a congressional committee studying the necessity of concentration camps for the Nikkei, to repudiate the leadership of Mike Masaoka

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and his Japanese American Citizens League. He said the JACL was being appointed the leaders and representatives of Japanese America without having consulted, sought, or obtained the approval of the 120,000 Japanese Americans concerned. He called the JACL “Quislings.”

Before this same committee the leaders of the JACL declared that 25 percent of the Nisei were disloyal and only with JACL’s help could the government separate the wolves from the sheep. “How could they have ever been mistaken for a civil rights organization?” Jimmie often wondered aloud.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and brought America into World War II, the JACL’s betrayal of Japanese America to White racist demagoguery was already a *fait accompli*. The JACL had invented and asked for a loyalty oath to distinguish between the good and evil Japanese Americans, and it had fingered thousands of Issei and Kibei-Nisei as potential saboteurs and joined the local police and the FBI in their arrests.

And after asking for concentration camps in which persons of Japanese ancestry would have their behavior modified, be “Americanized,” and—following the JACL’s fifteen pages of recommendations—be turned into “Better Americans for a Greater America,” they intimidated the Nikkei into entering the camps without protest or resistance by lying to them about a nonexistent U.S. Army “contingency plan” to use force to imprison all 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast within twenty-four hours.

The U.S. Army had 174,000 men in uniform in December 1941 with 488 machine guns and forty rickety tanks from World War I. Even if they wanted to, the army had neither the manpower nor the arms and vehicles needed to accomplish Masaoka’s “contingency plan.”

All this Jimmie Omura summed up in a phrase that has become famous, if not credited: “The JACL sold Japanese America down the river.” Since then, many Nisei have said, “The JACL sold Japanese America down the river,” but not too loudly, for the camps gave Japanese America to the JACL to run as its own police state.

The latest summation of the JACL betrayal is known as “The Lim Report.” From the first hints of incarceration, Omura sought to resist any racially selective orders on constitutional grounds and assert the Nisei rights as U.S. citizens in the courts. The JACL declared all test cases to be seditious, traitorous, and un-American because they brought bad publicity to the Nisei. Omura appealed to the Nisei for money to hire a lawyer and pursue a test case, but because of the JACL police state no one dared to

respond. Jimmie's attempt at going for a redress of constitutional grievance fizzled. Still, Jimmie didn't take the hint.

Omura wanted to keep writing. He didn't feel he'd be free to write if he were evicted and incarcerated, so he "voluntarily evacuated" to Colorado and eventually, in two years, became editor of the English-language section of the Denver *Rocky Shimpō*.

Omura's editorials on the right and wrong way for Nisei to resist the draft inspired the Issei and the Nisei alike, especially at Wyoming's Heart Mountain camp, where unlike the resistance at the other nine camps administered by the War Relocation Authority, there was leadership and organization. At the other camps, Nisei were individually calling the government's bluff. If the government takes away their citizenship rights, they're no longer citizens. And if the government really thinks they're Japanese, then the government can't draft them, but must send them back to Japan.

The strategy was to embarrass the government into saying it'd made a mistake: the Nisei were obviously U.S. citizens; restore the Nisei to their precamp condition, *then* draft them, everybody's happy, on with the war. Jimmie thought this strategy for restoring the constitutional rights of Nisei was wrongheaded, to say the least.

Omura had already been fingered by the FBI thanks to the JACL's Minoru Yasui. Yasui went out of his way to personally promise Jimmie, to his face, "[I will] see you behind bars." Knowing the JACL and the FBI were ready to pounce, Omura chose his words carefully when he editorialized on Nisei draft resisters. These are the words that got him arrested:

Those who are resisting the draft are too few, too unorganized and basically unsound in their viewpoints.

Expatriation is not the answer to our eventual redemption of democratic and constitutional rights. Unorganized draft resistance is not the proper method to pursue our grievances.

We do not dispute the fact that such rights have been largely stripped and taken from us. We further agree that the government should restore a large part of those rights before asking us to contribute our lives to the welfare of the nation—to sacrifice our lives on the field of battle.

But ours should not be an act of rashness or haste. There is no reason why we should not petition for a redress of grievances, but there is every reason why we should resist the draft in the way it is being done now.

The Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee refused to respond to the draft until their "citizenship status" was "clarified" in the courts. Their strategy was

to use the draft to test the constitutionality of the exclusion and detention of American citizens of Japanese ancestry. If the exclusion and detention were legal, then the Nisei were no longer citizens. If they were not legal then the government could not draft the Nisei until all their rights and properties were restored and the wrongs redressed.

Eighty-eight Nisei men at Heart Mountain resisted the draft and were convicted in Cheyenne's federal court and imprisoned in Leavenworth, Kansas, and McNeil, Washington, federal prisons. They were among the 262 draft resisters pardoned on Christmas Eve 1947 by President Harry S. Truman.

James Omura was tried with seven leaders of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee as a coconspirator, in a conspiracy to cause violations of the Selective Service. He wrote letters appealing to the people he had published in his various newspapers and *Current Life* for help with the expenses of his defense. He didn't receive a dime in the mail. Not only did the cream of Nisei poets and writers not send any money; they didn't send any letters. He was acquitted but by JACL design, financially ruined and ostracized from the society controlled by the JACL police state.

From this moment on, James Omura would be thought of as dead. His career in Nisei journalism was over. The leaders of the Fair Play Committee, Kiyoshi Okamoto, Paul Nakadate, Frank Emi, Minoru Tamesa, Isamu Horino, Ben Wakaye, and the Issei Zen man, Guntaro Kubota, had their convictions reversed in appeals court.

Before the Fair Play Committee trials, the JACL openly threatened the draft resisters and James Omura with social ostracism in the pages of the JACL weekly *Pacific Citizen*. The JACL's Joe Grant Masaoka and Minoru Yasui proudly worked as shills for the FBI to try and intimidate and threaten the resisters into giving up their cause, and turn fink on them.

After the trials the JACL made good on its threat. Last year [1993], Jimmie told us: "When I was acquitted, I felt I was vindicated. Vindicated as a person. Vindicated in my profession. I returned to Denver and tried to obtain work. I was hounded from one job after another. It took me three months to finally find a job. Actually I eventually went into landscape contracting. Because there I felt that I couldn't be molested or harassed by people who were against me."

His ostracism from the Japanese American community was so complete that even his admirers, including Michi Weglyn, who quotes and writes

about him in her book *Years of Infamy*, and the draft resisters themselves, thought the James Omura who dared repudiate the JACL was dead.

No, he was actually living in Denver. To the Japanese Americans there he might have been better off dead. He said the ostracism was not physical or violent. He wasn't attacked in the streets or beat up. "Most of all it was one of these subtle sort of things. You could feel it. You could feel the tenseness. I was in a bowling league and I could feel the tenseness. It got so bad that I couldn't bowl any longer. It was no fun, I can tell you that."

The Bernstein Commission hearings on redress in the early 1980s brought Jimmie back into Nisei history from the dead. When redress activist Henry Miyatake approached me at the hearings in Seattle and told me there was a Jimmie Omura who wanted to meet me, I was dumbfounded.

Could this be *the* James Omura who said the JACL sold Japanese America down the river? He was. He wanted to meet me because of what I said about the JACL betrayal before the commission. And Lawson Inada and Shawn Wong and I wanted to meet him. That first meeting we sat with Jimmie Omura in a pizza parlor and felt we had found a long-lost uncle.

He had inspired the Heart Mountain draft resisters to make their stand in 1944, and through the 1980s he inspired the resisters to come out of the shadows of their social ostracism, tell their stories, and reclaim the history they had made. It was something to see.

Men who had never spoken of their resistance jail terms appeared in broad daylight to meet James Omura. And Jimmie found himself living like an old uncle. Frank Emi was pleased to have Jimmie stay at his house in San Gabriel. Mits Koshiyama and Dave Kawamoto were gushing all over having Jimmie stay at their homes in San Jose. Yosh Kuromiya in Los Angeles. Jimmie was on the road again, writing and working on a book about Japanese America, the JACL, the camps, the resisters, and himself—the storyteller, nitpicker, gossip, and old crank of the Japanese American family. Jimmie was a necessary old man. I think he even spent a night in my house.

Jimmie was at work on his book when he was struck with a heart attack and died, in Denver, at 6:35 a.m., June 20, 1994. He had lived to see the resisters he championed begin to be restored to the community. After forty years of silence and obscurity, Jimmie began to be rediscovered and his work recognized by Asian America. The Asian American Journalists Association honored him. The National Coalition for Redress/Reparations honored him. But Japanese America, Asian America, never knew Jimmie well enough.

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