Preface

“A Uniquely Genuine Person”

YOSH KUROMIYA

James Matsumoto Omura was everything the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) was not. It is difficult to define one without the other.

Like two opposing astrological signs, they held in common the relevance of any particular issue because they were inextricably locked on to a common axis, yet held conflicting perceptions and ideologies on dealing with the issue because they approached the subject with a set of opposing survival dynamics.

The JACL, pragmatically, felt the future of Japanese Americans lay in their convincing America of their worthiness and credibility through good deeds, eventually attaining the social acceptance of the broader American public and thereby political empowerment. In short, “the end justifies the means.” They proceeded to draw an exceedingly wide swath as to the moral and ethical limits of those means.

James Omura, on the other hand, saw the “end and means” as two phases of a single aspiration. The worthiness of any goal was part and parcel of the moral integrity of the process by which the goal was achieved. In terms of the Nisei (second-generation Japanese Americans) during the World War II crisis: to believe in the primacy of our citizenship, and therefore our loyalty, as a foregone conclusion, and not something to be earned or proven. Innocent until proven guilty. To be what we already are. His commitments were based on these precepts.

As events evolved, the pragmatic JACL approach seemed to prevail. Yet the visionary ideals of James Omura, a few of his contemporaries, and many

more in the growing new generation of Asian American intellectuals and “realists” expressed doubts of the “model minority” myths. There was hope!

My initial awareness of James M. Omura was in 1942 (precamp) after his famous query on February 23 at the San Francisco hearings of the Tolan Committee—“Has the Gestapo come to America?”—as the national JACL continued its witch hunt against the Issei (immigrant-generation Japanese Americans, ineligible for U.S. citizenship) and Kibei (Nisei educated in Japan) as potential enemy spies. This transpired over three months after President Franklin Roosevelt was presented with the Munson Report findings of no immediate threat of espionage by the Japanese population either on the West Coast or in Hawai‘i. The JACL declared James Omura as “Public Enemy Number One” and proceeded to destroy him in the eyes of the Japanese American community.

During the 1944 Nisei draft controversy at Wyoming’s Heart Mountain incarceration camp, Omura supported the constitutional basis of the draft through his editorials in the English section of the *Rocky Shimpō*, an ethnic vernacular newspaper in Denver. However, he also warned of legal entanglements, especially in the lower courts, where constitutional veracity held little weight.

Later that same year, Omura was indicted as a coconspirator counseling draft evasion along with seven leaders of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee (FPC). Omura had never set foot in Heart Mountain, nor had he met any of the FPC leaders. He had obviously been set up by the JACL. Omura was cleared of all charges, but court costs had virtually wiped out all his savings. Further, he lost his *Rocky Shimpō* editorship and was blackballed at other publishing firms under the influence of the JACL. The Denver-area Japanese American community had turned its back on Omura financially, socially, and in employment out of fear of JACL reprisals.

In 1981 James Omura reemerged as a witness in the Seattle session of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC). He had virtually disappeared since his JACL-inspired censure and abandonment by the Denver-area Japanese American community. Frank Chin, a Chinese American playwright, became aware of the Heart Mountain draft resistance and the FPC, and having met James Omura in Seattle after his CWRIC testimony, proceeded to reunite him with the few

surviving Heart Mountain draft resisters he could locate, including me, along with FPC leader Frank Emi.

When Jimmie Omura had speaking engagements or other business in the Los Angeles area, he often stayed in Frank Emi's home. On one occasion Frank also had a speaking engagement, in San Jose, so he asked my wife, Irene, and me to take Jimmie in. It was on very short notice and within fifteen minutes Emi and Omura appeared at our front door. We quickly cleared space in our spare bedroom, hoping it would suffice. Jimmie spent most of the day quietly in the room, reading or writing, so I was careful not to disturb him. When necessary for his research, I would drive him to the Los Angeles Public Library or to other sources of information. I was very comfortable in his presence and felt honored that he referred to us as his "home away from home." However, once when he popped up unannounced, we did suggest to him that he allow a couple of days warning of his arrival. Fortunately, we didn't have prior commitments on that particular occasion, but he could have been locked out of his "home away from home" for the entire day.

I detected in Jimmie a rare quality of sincerity and honesty that I seldom encountered in my then seventy years of existence on earth. I was, of course, familiar with the conventional "face-saving" rituals we were all conditioned to accept as sincerity and honesty, but with Jimmie it was a deeper, more frightful commitment that often seemed to put his very survival at risk.

Omura's decision to place the telling of his life story in the capable hands of Dr. Arthur Hansen was no accident either. Although it would take years for him to review and order the awesome volume of notes and narratives thrust upon him, thanks to his dedication, James Matsumoto Omura's style of sincerity and honesty will be forever preserved.

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