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## Japanese Latin Americans Detained During WWII Seek Redress from U.S.

by Janelle Conaway

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During World War II, more than 2,200 people of Japanese ancestry living in Latin American countries—80 percent of them in Peru—were captured against their will and taken to the US, stripped of their homes, their businesses, even their personal identity documents. Some would be exchanged for US citizens who had been taken hostage in war zones in the Far East; others would be held in US internment camps for the duration of the war, like their Japanese American counterparts. Only a small percentage of them would be able to return to Latin America.

In a March hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Isamu Carlos “Art” Shibayama, 86, testified about what it was like for him, as a 13-year-old Peruvian boy, to be interned with his family in Texas—and later, as an adult, to fight for justice in the US, a country that considered him an “illegal alien.”

“The government brought us here at gunpoint, so how can they classify us as illegal aliens?” he asked at the hearing, describing an injustice that clearly still rankles. “We didn’t do anything.”

His daughter, Bekki Shibayama, told the commission that the only “supposed crime” her family had committed was to be of Japanese descent at a time when the US government wanted hostages to swap. Her great-grandparents were taken from Peru and eventually sent back to Japan in exchange for US citizens being held by Axis forces. The part of the family that ended up in the US never saw them again.

“Quite honestly, I cannot say that our family has handled the trauma of these wartime experiences very well,” Bekki Shibayama testified. “There’s still a veil of denial, and it still haunts us and still makes us feel angry and frustrated whenever we think of the injustices that our family had to face.”

### *A footnote in history*

The story of Japanese Latin American deportees in World War II is somewhat of a footnote to the better-known history of the mass imprisonment of some 45,000 Japanese nationals and 75,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry in the US. At the National Museum of American History, the exhibition called “Righting a Wrong: Japanese Americans and World War II”—which opened in February to mark the 75th anniversary of the post-Pearl Harbor executive order that led to the incarcerations—makes only a passing mention of the Latin Americans. And a 1982 report presented to Congress by the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians covers the Latin American experience in an appendix.

According to the report, called *Personal Justice Denied*, the US government considered it a “military necessity” to expand its internment and national security efforts to Latin America. “What began as a controlled, closely monitored deportation program to detain potentially dangerous diplomatic and consular officials of Axis nations and Axis businessmen grew to include enemy aliens who were teachers, small businessmen, tailors, and barbers—mostly people of Japanese ancestry,” it notes.

Although the deportations of Latin Americans were driven in part by fear of a Japanese attack in the region—particularly at the Panama Canal—other factors came into play, the report says, including the opportunity for the US to exchange these Latin American Japanese for American citizens trapped in Japanese-controlled territories. According to the report, 16 Latin American countries interned at least 8,500 nationals from Japan, Germany, and Italy during the war, and 12 deported some or all of their alien internees to the US. In the case of Peru, at least, some Peruvian citizens of Japanese descent were deported as well. Anti-Japanese sentiment had been building for years in Peru, and after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the government of President Manuel Prado y Ugarteche (1939-1945, 1956-1962) moved aggressively to close Japanese residents' newspapers, organizations, and schools, and to freeze their assets.

This was not just a case of wartime hysteria but of economic opportunism, according to Grace Shimizu, director of the Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project (JPOHP), the nongovernmental organization that brought the case to the IACHR on behalf of Art Shibayama and his two younger brothers, Kenichi Shibayama and Takeshi Shibayama. The situation in Peru affected Shimizu's own family too, she said in an interview. Her father had emigrated from Japan to Peru when he was 18—after being denied entry to the US—and he and other family members established a charcoal business there. After two decades in Peru, he was deported to the US, and his family ended up in the same camp as the Shibayamas.

While Personal Justice Denied puts the total number of Latin American residents deported to the US during the war at around 3,000—two-thirds of them Japanese nationals and their families—Shimizu said more recent research indicates that many more Germans were sent to the US than had been known before. The German American Internee Coalition puts the number of people deported from Latin America to internment camps in the US at more than 6,600: 4,058 Germans, 2,264 Japanese, and 287 Italians.

### *The Shibayama case*

Art Shibayama's grandparents had a retail business in the port city of Callao—now part of the Lima metropolitan area—and were among the first Japanese taken to the US after Pearl Harbor. His grandparents had raised Art Shibayama from around ages 2½ to 5, and after he started school he continued to spend vacations with them. "After they left Peru, I never saw them again," he testified at the IACHR hearing. "I was really sad."

In 1944, Art Shibayama and his parents and siblings were sent to New Orleans on a US military ship, and they spent the next 2½ years at an internment camp in Crystal City, Texas. "We had a 20-foot fence all the way around us with a guard tower in each corner, with machine guns and rifles. And we couldn't go out," he recalled. He and his siblings attended the Japanese school in the camp, even though their language was Spanish, and after school the children played sports. All in all, he told the commission, the internment wasn't as hard on them as on their parents—especially his father, who lost his business in Lima.

After the war ended, many of the Latin American internees who had not been deported to Japan lingered in "a kind of legal no-man's land," as the report described it. The Shibayamas wanted to return to Peru, but the Peruvian government did not allow them to. The family spent the next 2½ years with fellow internees at a produce processing plant in Seabrook, New Jersey, where during the peak season they worked long hours for little pay.

At this point, they were still classified as “illegal aliens,” because they could not produce citizenship papers, even though—as Paul Mills, an attorney for the petitioners, explained during the hearing—it was the US that had taken their papers away after they were detained. Mills described the “sham proceedings” that compounded the harm to the family. “It is simply impossible to reconcile this conduct with any notion of international law or even of justice at all,” Mills told the IACHR.

The US did not send a delegation to the IACHR hearing. During the early stages of the proceedings, it argued in filings that the IACHR lacked jurisdiction and that the case should be considered inadmissible on several grounds. The IACHR declared the matter admissible in 2006, and the hearing this year was to consider the merits of the case.

Art Shibayama ended up joining the US Army during the Korean War, thinking that would be a good way to get citizenship. He was denied citizenship, however, based on his “illegal” entry into the country. In 1956, through an arrangement with the government, he was finally able to gain permanent resident status by going to Canada and then re-entering the country. It was not until 1970 that he became a US citizen.

Most of the internees from Latin America received different—and lesser—treatment than their US counterparts. Bekki Shibayama testified that her US-born mother had received redress under the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which provided restitution of \$20,000 and an official apology to each US internee. “She felt very upset that my father and his family didn’t receive it, because she felt that they had been made to suffer more,” she said.

In the 1990s, several lawsuits were filed on behalf of the former Japanese Latin American internees. One of these cases, *Mochizuki et al. v. USA*, resulted in a settlement, in which the US government agreed to issue apology letters and compensation of \$5,000 to each internee. Close to 800 Japanese Latin Americans received compensation under either the Civil Liberties Act or the Mochizuki settlement. The Shibayama brothers were among the few who rejected the settlement and continued to pursue claims—unsuccessfully—in US courts. Speaking to the IACHR, Art Shibayama explained that he believed the internees from Latin America should have received the same redress as Japanese Americans, and added that the apology letter offered in the Mochizuki settlement was not specific and looked completely unofficial. “The letter didn’t mean anything,” he said.

If it finds for the petitioners, the IACHR can issue recommendations to the US in the case. When the commissioners asked the petitioners what they wanted from the IACHR, they received several answers: redress equal to the Civil Liberties Act; educational funds so the Latin American story can become better known; any mention of “illegal alien” expunged from the Shibayamas’ official records; a real apology.

“It’s been pretty disappointing that it’s taken this long, and still the US government hasn’t apologized for its wrongdoing,” Bekki Shibayama said.

In her closing remarks at the hearing, Grace Shimizu asked the commission to keep in mind the full scope of the “war crimes” committed against the Shibayamas, noting that the US had stripped them of their home, their community, their grandparents, and their nationality. “The government attempted to strip them of their humanity and dignity and tried to dehumanize them,” she said. “They violated their human rights with impunity.”

Attorney Mills, for his part, referred to the executive order issued early in the Trump administration temporarily barring citizens from certain Muslim-majority countries from entering the US. He asked

the commission to use the Shibayama case as a way “to add its voice as swiftly as possible to those that urge the United States of America, with respect, to respect the principles of international law.”

In a very personal moment, the president of the IACHR, Commissioner Francisco Eguiguren, told Art Shibayama that—quite aside from what the commission decides—he felt “grieved” by what had happened to the petitioner, especially since it was in Eguiguren’s home country of Peru. “My apologies,” he said. Art Shibayama spoke for the first time in Spanish: “Gracias. Muchas gracias.”

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