

The Little-Known Story of the Japanese Peruvians during WWII

As people become more aware of the WWII internment of Japanese Americans, it is still a surprise for many to learn that persons of Japanese ancestry were forcibly deported from their homes in Latin America and imprisoned in internment camps in the United States for the purpose of hostage exchange. Not only did the U.S. government violate the civil rights of its own citizens, but it also went outside its borders and violated the human rights of civilians in Latin America.

From December 1941 to 1945, the U.S. government orchestrated the forcible deportation of 2,264 men, women and children of Japanese ancestry from 13 Latin American countries to be used as hostages in exchange for Americans held by Japan. Of these, about 1,800 (80%) were Japanese Peruvians.

The U.S. government financed their transportation over international borders and their incarceration in U.S. Department of Justice internment camps. It justified its control over the Japanese Latin Americans (JLAs) by confiscating their passports upon entry to the country and labeling them as "illegal aliens." Most of the JLAs were interned in a former migrant labor camp at Crystal City, Texas. This facility also held persons of Italian and German ancestry from the United States and Latin America, as well as Japanese Americans.

Over 500 Japanese Peruvians were included in the two prisoner of war exchanges that took place in 1942 and 1943. This left about 1,400 Japanese Latin Americans who continued to be interned in the U.S. Their ordeal did not end with the close of WWII in 1945. The remaining Japanese Latin Americans were told that they were "illegal aliens" and would be deported from the U.S. At first, the Peruvian government refused to readmit any Japanese Peruvians, even those who were Peruvian citizens or married to Peruvian citizens. As a result, between November 1945 and June 1946, over 900 Japanese Peruvians were deported to war-devastated Japan. 300 Japanese Peruvians remained in the U.S. and fought deportation through the courts. Eventually, about 100 Japanese Peruvians were able to return to Peru. It was not until August 1954 that the Japanese Peruvians who stayed in the U.S. were allowed to begin the process of becoming permanent U.S. residents. Many later became U.S. citizens.

This violation of civil and human rights was not justified by a security threat. Rather it was the outcome of historic racism, anti-foreign prejudice, economic competition and political opportunism during time of war. The U.S. government has yet to provide justice for this wrongdoing against the Japanese Latin Americans.

For more information:

Please contact the Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project (JPOHP) for more information. If you would like to make a financial contribution (which is tax deductible), we would welcome it very much! Please make your check payable to JPOHP/NJAHS and send it to:

Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project (JPOHP)
P.O. Box 1384
El Cerrito, CA 94530
Email: jpohpusa@gmail.com

Photo credit: Japanese Peruvian detainees arriving in Panama in transit to the U.S. for internment, January 1943. Koshio Henry Shima Collection. Courtesy of the University of Idaho's Asian American Comparative Collection. U.S. Army Signal Corps photo. *National Archives*.



What is the JPOHP?

The Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project (JPOHP) was formed in 1991 by former Japanese Peruvian internees and their families to preserve the remembrances of those who were forcibly taken from Peru and interned in concentration camps in Panama and the United States during World War II. By documenting these family oral histories, we strive to deepen our understanding of the rich texture of our past – with the hope that such violations of civil and human rights are not repeated by any government during times of peace or war.

The Project goals are to:

- *collect and conduct oral histories;*
- *educate ourselves and others about the Japanese Peruvian experience during World War II;*
- *promote dialogue and interaction among Japanese Peruvians and the broader society in the US, Peru, and Japan, and;*
- *provide information and referral for former Japanese Latin American internees and their families seeking redress.*

Please join us in preserving this part of our history.

If you would like to share any comments or suggestions or would like to know more about our Project, please contact us at the address below.

We would welcome financial contributions (which are tax-deductible) very much!
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