Pacific Salon

Japanese Interned in Siberia

Haruko Sakakibara, University of California, Davis

On March 29 Consulate General and the Japan Society of Northern California hosted a special *Pacific Salon* program for Leadership Circle members and representatives from corporate members featuring Haruko Sakakibara, lecturer at UC Davis to learn about the little-known plight of more than a half million Japanese interned in Soviet labor camps after World War II.

Ms. Sakakibara, a full time lecturer at the Department of Asian Languages and Culture at the UC Davis, explained how Soviet troops interned hundreds of thousands of Japanese troop who had laid down their arms when the Emperor announced Japan’s surrender to the Allied Forces in August 1945, and, in violation of the Japan-Russo treaty of non-aggression and international law, placed them in forced labor camps all across Siberia and into Central Asia. Many Japanese civilian administrators who ran the Japan-controlled government in Manchuria were also interned.

The internees were put to work cutting wood, setting up factories, building railways and constructing buildings. They were imprisoned in camps with armed guards and given only minimal food. Ten of thousands died of starvation, disease, accidents and overwork. The Soviets began returning the internees to Japan in 1948 but the last internees did not return to Japan for up to 10 years. The families of the internees had no idea what had happened to their relatives and many believed they had died in the fighting at the end of the war. Ms. Sakakibara explained that her interest in this story, which is little known in the West and rarely discussed in Japan, was sparked by the fact that her uncle was an internee.

Ms. Sakakibara had some interesting observations comparing the internment of Japanese in Siberia to the internment in the US of Japanese-Americans. Though the level of hardship was of course different, the shame that Japanese internees in both situations felt was similar and as a result it was not unusual for Japanese internees from Siberia and Japanese-American internees to want to avoid talking about their experiences.

Consul General Jun Yamada, who is a Russian expert, explained that Japanese internees were part of a much larger forced labor institution in Stalinist USSR, and the numbers of interned Japanese were dwarfed by Russians, Central Asians, and others who were part of the forced labor network in Siberia. The system began to be dismantled by the Soviets after Stalin died, which was when Japanese internees began to be repatriated.

The program was followed by a wonderful performance from Ms. Sakakibara, who is a classically trained pianist, of a moving song she wrote about the American internment of Japanese-Americans. She has also penned a song about the Siberian internment. Following that was a much lighter sing-along of popular Japanese songs.

Many thanks to the Consul General and his staff and Ms. Sakakibara for a very special program and to the Japan Society’s Leadership Circle and corporate members for their generous support for the important work the Japan Society is doing to build stronger bridges of engagement between Japan and the Bay Area.

For those interested in learning more about this interesting piece of Japanese history here are some websites to visit:

Japanese in Siberia   Main Page

<https://japaneseinsiberia.ucdavis.edu/>

Interview with Mr. Peter Iwao Sano (from Palo Alto) I   (script available in the website)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63fUotszKgI>

Interview with Mr. Peter Iwao Sano (from Palo Alto) ll   (script available in the website)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tujt5NkDlVM>

Interview with Mr. Hideyuki Aizawa  l

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUvJrE0ZR0o>   (script available in the website)

Interview with Mr. Hideyuki Aizawa  ll

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nc2rsnvc7jU>  (script available in the website)

Song of Siberia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPD6ILb7Nkc&feature=youtu.be>