Always a Rebel: 
An Interview with Kazu Iijima

GLENN OMATSU

It is in the tiny struggles of individual peoples that
the great moments of history are truly revealed.
Rosa Luxemburg

For Kazu (Ikeda) Iijima (born 1918), “coming of age” in the 1930s meant a political awakening. Together with her two older sisters—Mary and Nori—she became a Communist and participated in the “great moments” of the decade: the Depression, the upsurge of the masses, the San Francisco General Strike, the world war, the internment and subsequent resettlement, and rise and fall of the Communist Party.

In committing their lives to political activism, the three Ikeda sisters followed in the rebellious tradition of their parents, two very unusual Issei. Their mother, Tsukiko Nagura, came from a samurai family background and had an arranged marriage with one of Japan’s leading industrialists. Dissatisfied with her life of passive ease and comfort, she left her husband and travelled around the world, eventually coming to the United States to study English. Here, she became intrigued with the notion that a woman could choose her husband. As Kazu states, her mother was “a feminist in her own time.”

Kando Ikeda, the man whom Tsukiko Nagura chose to marry in America, was also a rebel. Born in Niigata into a family of Buddhist priests, he ran away from home rather than follow in the tradition. After graduating from Imperial University, he came to America where he became a writer and newspaper publisher and an outspoken Japanese nationalist.1

GLENN OMATSU is the associate editor of Amerasia Journal. He is a longtime labor activist and a writer on “organizing the unorganized.”
By 1940, the Ikeda household must have been a lively place. All three daughters had become "Reds," while their father remained an ardent Japanese nationalist. Yet Kazu recalls that her father—while "hating Communists"—never pressured his daughters to change their political beliefs. He often told them: "If you believe in something, you have to be ready to go to prison for it."

The three Ikeda sisters were part of a small Nisei progressive movement influenced by the major political upheavals of the time. It is an aspect of Japanese American history that has yet to be fully documented. As a member of the Oakland Young Democratic Club, Kazu was part of the only Nisei organization that protested the "evacuation," branding it "an act of fascism." The statement, issued before the internment, was never published.

The internment also led to Kazu's decision to part with the Communist Party and to become an independent radical. After the "evacuation" order, the Party expelled all Japanese American members. This was heavily criticized, as were other policies regarding Japanese Americans, in a theoretical paper presented to the Party leadership by a small group of Nisei which included Kazu and her sister Mary in New York City following resettlement. The Party leadership never formally responded to the paper. It would not be until 1959 that it publicly acknowledged its "serious errors" around the internment question.

Tak Iijima, Kazu's husband, has matched his wife's commitment to social change. Beginning with his prewar membership in the Young Democratic Club, he has fought throughout his life for justice and equality. Drafted into the Army just one month before Pearl Harbor, he later helped train the 442nd Combat Team. After the war, he and his wife became activists with the Japanese American Committee for Democracy in New York.

Kazu and Tak's children—Lynne Iijima-Marks and Chris Iijima—have continued the family tradition of political activism. They were charter members of the first Asian American political organization in New York City, Asian Americans for Action, which was co-founded in April 1969 by Kazu and her longtime friend, Minn Matsuda.

Kazu remains politically active and presently is a member of the Organization of Asian Women and the National Committee for Independent Political Action in New York. She and her two sisters, as well as Minn Matsuda, continue to struggle against racism, sexism, other domestic inequalities, and imperialism.

The following interview, conducted on 15 September 1985—during the Nisei newspaper conference in Los Angeles—focuses on Kazu's "coming of age" in the turbulent 1930s. The interview has been edited for publication.
Interview with Kazu Iijima

**Amerasia:** What was it like to come of age during the 1930s? What was it like to grow up in the Oakland Japanese community?

**Kazu:** We faced race prejudice—our parents called it *haiseki*. And mostly we had economic problems, and I think that deterred our growing into adulthood. Our whole thing was survival, and the only avenue open to us was education. So survival through education and survival to make a living—those became the most important things.

**Amerasia:** Toshio Mori has written a number of stories about the Oakland Japanese community. Do they accurately reflect life of those times?

**Kazu:** My parents were very close to Toshio Mori's family; his mother and my mother were very good friends. Toshio was writing at that time. We didn't see them very much because they lived in the country. There was something so gentle about him, so genial and laid-back. His stories were about individuals in the community. I understand that one is based on my father.

**Amerasia:** What was community life like in those days?

**Kazu:** The Issei were marvelous people. We were connected with the Buddhist Church. The Issei would get together and do kabuki, they would do plays—these were gardeners, houseboys, and small business people—they would make their own costumes, and at parties they would see who could write the best *haiku*. They were an unusual group of people. And the women were so strong—it was so difficult for the women in those days. There were a few cases where the men would come home and beat their wives. They did it out of frustration. There was no other place that they could let it out, so they took it out on their wives. Some of them would come to my mother and cry.

**Amerasia:** Some have described the young Nisei in the 1930s as being rather insulated and growing up within a cocoon.

**Kazu:** We had to be. There was no mixing with the whites. We grew up twenty-four hours with racism, and the only way that we could have a social life was to stay within our own community. That was how we protected ourselves. It was so painful, the racism. This is something that is so difficult for the Sansei to understand.

**Amerasia:** When you say the racism was so painful, could you give an example?

**Kazu:** One thing was that you couldn't mix socially with the whites. I was very active in school—in sports and with literary journals. But on weekends we had entirely different lives from our white classmates. We couldn't go to the dances, because we knew that they would never dance with us. That was taboo. And our parents took so much abuse. They discussed it openly
to show their anger and humiliation. We were hearing the talk all the time. Haiseki. Haiseki. We grew up with the word, haiseki. Haiseki and fukeiki ["hard times"]. Those were the two words that we grew up with. The indignation of our parents. So we really knew that there was an outer world that was very dangerous and very hostile.

Amerasia: How did the outer world impact on the Nisei? For example, the 1930s was a time of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and mass protest movements.

Kazu: I don't think most Nisei thought too much about things like the New Deal. We were just trying to survive. Until I got political, things seemed to be just happening out there, and we just reacted to them.

Amerasia: Did young Nisei like yourself read the Japanese American newspapers? Were you influenced by any of the writers?

Kazu: Yes. We thought a lot of Larry [Tajiri]. Because if there was anybody giving some type of political analysis, Larry was. He talked about racism. Racism is so much more institutionalized, but we called it “race prejudice” in those days. Haiseki.

“They Gave Us a Focus on Life”

Amerasia: Your father and mother were unusual people. What were their backgrounds?

Kazu: My father, Kando Ikeda, came from Niigata. And he was always a rebel. His family came from Buddhist priests, and he was supposed to become a Buddhist priest too. He ran away from home to go to Imperial University, where he graduated. He came to America for higher degrees. And he was also a writer; he published the Hokubei Hyoron newspaper. But he could never make a living. He was a terrible businessman. So we were always poor. [laughs] And he was always kicked out of houseboy jobs because he would fight with his employers—he wouldn't take anything. If anyone said “Jap,” he was out there ready to argue—he could speak some English. My mother, Tsukiko Nagura, was an unusual woman. She had an arranged marriage. She came from a samurai background, and she was married to one of the leading industrialists in Japan. But she hated the life, and she left her husband when their baby died and she traveled by herself around the world. She couldn't speak a word of English. She wrote a book about her travels. She had very different ideas, and she was a feminist in many ways. In her book she warned picture brides that the men were having a rough time in America, so they shouldn't get fooled. And the thing that intrigued her about America was that a woman could choose whom she wanted to marry. The final chapter in her book is about peace
Interview with Kazu Iijima

and world disarmament. She felt this was something women should bear in mind since it was their children who were involved. But she had such a terrible life in America because of the poverty. That's what really killed her. Poverty. Both of our parents were remarkable people. We three sisters often said that we were so lucky to have them. They gave us a focus on life.

Amerasia: Can you tell us more about your mother's book?

Kazu: It's written in very classical Japanese. I've had trouble finding someone who can translate it because of the language. And she wrote poetry, so even friends in Japan didn't think they could translate it unless they were poets. Also, my father was in the process of writing five books when he died in 1951. One of them is about Japan. And our friends in Japan, who are liberals, said it is very interesting because he had this whole theory about the Japanese empire. He was an imperialist.

Amerasia: What did his theory cover?

Kazu: Well, he felt that Japan should be a great power and should rule over the Pacific. But as a person, he was so unlike his politics. People used to say that even though he had nothing, he would give away the shirt off his back. I remember he once wrote in his newspaper about the local gangsters, and they came to see him with a gun. So he told them, "You think I'm going to back down because you're threatening me?" As far as his politics, I really had no idea what my father was doing. I do know that one of his close friends whom he went to visit all the time was an ex-Japanese Navy man. But we really didn't know what he was up to. We just knew that he was a very lovable man. But completely irresponsible in supporting us. [laughs]

Amerasia: Then it must have been quite a burden on your mother. She probably had to think of ideas for day-to-day survival.

Kazu: Yes, she really worked hard. And so when she died, my father's hair turned white overnight. She died in 1934—at age fifty-nine. She was never very healthy, and I think that as a result of living in America, she died. Both my parents always wanted to go back to Japan but never had the money. And also my father thought that since we girls were born here, we should stay. He always used to tell us, "You're American citizens, so you become the best American citizens. They won't give me citizenship here, so I'll be the best Japanese citizen." He expressed that often.

Amerasia: Your parents sent all three daughters to college. Why did they believe this was so important?

Kazu: My mother wanted each of us to have a career. My oldest sister, Mary, was the community's pianist. My mother sent her to Mills College in Oakland because it was the best college for music. My second sister, Nori,
was really a tremendous student. My mother wanted her to go into some type of scholarly work. So she went to U.C. Berkeley. And I was the black sheep. [laughs] My mother said I had nothing going for me. [laughs] So she just talked about my getting married. But she always said to look at a husband not in terms of money but at his feelings for the community.

*Amerasia*: So your parents sent you to U.C. Berkeley?

*Kazu*: My mother believed that it was more important for women than men to get a higher education because we would be closer to the children. We would have a greater influence on them, particularly in terms of world peace and disarmament. If we talked about these things, then our children would grow up with these thoughts in mind. So my mother was a feminist in her own time.

"There Was Always a Hope"

*Amerasia*: What was U.C. Berkeley like in those days? Were there very many Nisei students?

*Kazu*: Oh, yes, there were many. I was very active in the Japanese Students' Club. There was a Japanese Men Students' Club and a Japanese Women Students' Club. I remember the last conference that we had—by that time I had become political, so I put on the program Paul Radin and others who were political. The Dean's Office called me and asked, "How come you're putting these guys on the program?" So I said very innocently, "They seem to have a grasp about what is happening." So they let it go. The student clubs were very active. But, of course, most of it was social.

*Amerasia*: What type of aspirations did the Nisei students have at the time?

*Kazu*: Well, there was always a hope. That's a difference I see from working in Harlem [today], where there is so much hopelessness among the young people. They are so astute politically, but there is so much hopelessness. In the 1930s, although most of us felt that the chances of getting work in our field were nil, we always had the hope that someday we could use our skills. I majored in English—I knew that I couldn't do anything with it. But the hope was always nurtured by our parents. After I graduated from U.C., I had to work in a home—as a domestic. That was the only thing that was open to us. I wanted to get a job as a clerk but no one would hire me. Finally, I passed a civil service exam, but overall our job opportunities were nil. I remember riding on a train from Oakland to San Francisco, and I saw this garbage collector. And I was thinking that he was so lucky to have a job. But we were always thinking that maybe someday we would have a chance to use our skills.
Amerasia: Yori Wada was at U.C. Berkeley the same time as you. In your wildest dreams, could you have pictured him forty years down the line becoming a U.C. Regent?

Kazu: No. Absolutely not. It was impossible.

Amerasia: So when people were talking about dreams and hopes, it was still on a very limited basis?

Kazu: To tell the truth, we didn't talk much about it openly. We kept it to ourselves. We never talked about aspirations because we knew that things were closed to us. But thanks to our parents, we never had a feeling of hopelessness.

Amerasia: How did you begin to get active politically? Was it the influence of going to U.C. Berkeley?

Kazu: Yes. I discovered what poverty was about, what racism was about. And my sister Nori was very active in the YWCA; she was the president of the campus YWCA. The YWCA would have all kinds of political discussions. And my first picket line was when the YWCA picketed the YMCA because of its racist practices. But primarily it was my sister who pushed me towards political activity. We used to have tremendous arguments at home. My older sister [Mary] and I were appalled at what she was doing. I can still remember my shame at seeing Nori handing out leaflets at Sather Gate in Berkeley. So we would argue into the wee hours of the morning, and she finally convinced us. It was during the last year of college that I joined the YCL.

Amerasia: What was the YCL?

Kazu: The Young Communist League—young people associated with the [Communist] Party. And at that time we were organized into cells, so I didn't know who else was involved except those from my cell. There were just five of us in our cell. But one most exciting thing was that I became very conscious of the labor movement. Some of the organizers were CP members, and they would be beaten to a pulp by the police on picket lines. They went to the hospitals so often that the doctors would tell them, "You're here again?" They were such dedicated people. And I also remember the San Francisco General Strike. I was not political at that time, because it was 1934 and I was in high school. We had very close friends who had a little store in Nihonmachi, and they went on vacation. I don't know if they were aware of the strike or not, but they asked me to keep the store open. And it was great for me because it was the first time I had a job—paying peanuts—but it was still a job. So I went every morning, and one morning everything was closed down. Not a store was open. Not a car was running. It was like a ghost town. It was absolutely closed down. But I was very innocent and I went to the store and opened up. And two big longshoremen
came and said, "You know little girl, you’re supposed to close the store." And I said, "Look, this is my first job and the people are away on vacation, and I have to keep it open." So they let me keep it open. I had the only store open; everything else was closed down. But people were afraid to come in. And I remember one of the few customers I had was an Issei man who came to buy a condom. And I didn’t even know what it was. I didn't know what he was talking about, and I got so embarrassed when I learned what it was.

Amerasia: What did your YCL cell do on campus? Did you work only with Nisei students?

Kazu: No, our five-member cell had white students. And I must say that the cell was the only place where we didn't face racism. Our cell was assigned to work on campus.

Amerasia: The 1930s was a significant period for the CP in terms of participation in mass movements and development of theoretical work, such as the Black Nation thesis. Was there similar theoretical work done on other minorities? For example, was there any type of analysis done on Japanese Americans with regards to special oppression?

Kazu: Not as far as I know. But I was just an ordinary little member. And we had very little theoretical study in our cell. I don't know, maybe in the top echelons [of the Party], there was more theoretical study. But overall, the Asian communities were considered non-existent. And that's why I think the later Asian movement was so very important. It was the only time that the whole history of Asian immigration was brought up.

Amerasia: How did you handle political conflicts at home? What did your father say about his three daughters becoming Communists? What happened at the dinner table?

Kazu: As far as we girls were concerned, he allowed us to think the way we did. We had discussions, and we disagreed with him about Japan. And he hated Communists. But he never tried to stop us. I think he enjoyed the fact that we were using our heads. He never imposed his views on us. He told us, “If you believe in something, you have to be ready to go to prison for it. Don't just believe something like it's a game.” So the FBI during that time probably couldn't understand what was going on in our house. Our phone was so heavily tapped, we could hardly hear the other person. But here we were: the three of us girls were radicals, and our father was a Japanese nationalist. So it must have been such a funny record for the FBI. You know, I requested my FBI file because I knew I was under heavy FBI surveillance since my college days. And the only thing that they gave me were three pages about this group that I was in called the “Citizens of
Conscience" during the anti-Vietnam War movement, started by Communist Party members. And that was the only thing I got. Can you imagine?

_Amerasia:_ And what did your mother think about your political activity?

_Kazu:_ Don't forget that she died when I was fifteen. And we three sisters always used to say that we probably would have never gotten radical if she were alive. It was such a contradiction, because her own life was such an unusual, independent life. But she wanted her three daughters to be very traditional. And we were a prominent family. My mother would have been horrified if we did anything to upset that. But she was always very conscious of the community. She always tried to impress us to try to find a career even though we were women. She was a real contradiction.

"It Was Horrendous!"

_Amerasia:_ Let me read you a quote from Karl Yoneda's _Ganbatte_ about your father. Shortly after Pearl Harbor your father was picked up and put into a detention center along with Karl and others. And he said at that time: "Wait and see. The Japanese Imperial Navy will soon sail into the Bay and free all of us here except some of those Nisei, especially Yoneda."4

_Kazu:_ I'm sure he must have said that. He just hated Communism. And that's why I often wonder what he must have thought of his three daughters. After we became radicals, the Japanese community just snubbed us. So he must have known, but he never mentioned it to us.

_Amerasia:_ Karl also mentions that shortly after Pearl Harbor your sister Nori wrote a letter to the _San Francisco Chronicle_ denouncing your father for his pro-Japan views.5

_Kazu:_ Yes, and that really upset my older sister [Mary] and me.

_Amerasia:_ What happened?

_Kazu:_ That was one of the things that the CP asked her to do. It was horrendous, and we disagreed with it. It was awful. Newspapermen tried to get into our house, to climb through the windows. And it made front page coverage. Big headlines, because it was newsworthy that a Japanese girl had denounced her father. My father was already incarcerated at the time. But those were the things that the CP did that were just horrendous. Their whole thing was to do everything to help the war effort. Because the Soviet Union was pushed against the wall. So the CP was behind the whole war effort. You know, they made all of us [Japanese American members] get out of the Party at that time.

_Amerasia:_ When that decision was announced, did it come as a surprise?

_Kazu:_ I was surprised. And I was furious.
Amerasia: Looking back on the decision, Karl suggests in *Ganbatte* that it was due to Browder revisionism. What do you think?

Kazu: You can't throw it off onto one leader. All the members of the CP must take responsibility for what happened. I think this is one of the problems when people follow a line blindly. And it's a problem with democratic centralism. You know, it can be so comforting, to believe that there were all these people up there in the Party who were making all the decisions. You didn't have to think, and even if you did, it didn't make a difference. So you can't blame things on one leader. Look at all these people who are still active in the Party who backed our expulsion back then.

Amerasia: Did anyone protest the expulsion of Japanese American party members?

Kazu: In New York [after resettlement], some of us [Nisei] wrote a two or three page critique of the Party policy regarding the camps. We were very critical. And we sent it to the top echelon of the party. And they wouldn't accept the criticism.

Amerasia: What was contained in that paper?

Kazu: It took us months to write it because we wanted to make it theoretical. We criticized the party decision as a serious error because it impeded democratic rights. There was no formal response to our paper. They just sent some big shot, and he patted our heads. It was just the most insulting response. It was just incredible. So we said, "To hell with a group like that." And those of us who worked on the paper left en masse. We were so mad that we tore up our copy of the paper in front of the big shot they sent. We were so furious. We had worked for a couple of months to get it together, and it was dismissed like child's play. It was racist.

"Acts of Fascism in a War for Democracy"

Amerasia: Before the war, you were also active in the Oakland Young Democratic Club, one of the first Nisei progressive organizations. How did you first get involved?

Kazu: Actually, a very nice man organized some of us Nisei to participate as an election caucus. And I can't even remember who was running at the time. There was a progressive and a reactionary, and I think Richard Nixon was involved. It was really a bitter campaign.

Amerasia: This was while you were attending U.C. Berkeley?

Kazu: After. And following the election, we decided to continue as a group. It became a political education group and it was really wonderful. Most of the members were non-university people, really grassroots people. But
they were really sharp politically. And they came because they wanted the intellectual stimulation and the idealism that we stood for. We really had great discussions. And when we had to dissolve before the "evacuation," we wrote a statement condemning it.

**Amerasia:** What happened to that statement?

**Kazu:** It never was published! We sent it to the newspapers, but nobody published it. I think within the Japanese community, there was such a turmoil, such a sense of distress, that I'm sure none of the papers wanted to publish anything that would rock the boat.

**Amerasia:** What did the statement say?

**Kazu:** We condemned the "evacuation" and the incarceration as acts of fascism in a war for democracy. And we were entering the camps under protest. That was the gist of it. But to this day, I remember it, because we were angry. We were a small group—only a dozen of us—but everyone wanted to put in a word. So it was formulated by the group. And lost in the wind.

**Amerasia:** How did Nisei who joined the Young Democratic Club differ from other Nisei?

**Kazu:** Well, you had to be a little bit independent. And don't forget, they were red-baiting us. You had to be a little bit different and not care about what the community thought. But we were very close within the club, there was a warm feeling for one another. And the fact that most were non-university students meant that there was no intellectualizing.

**Amerasia:** What kind of activities did the group take up?

**Kazu:** We did participate in another local election. Also, there was a branch in Los Angeles and a sympathetic group in San Francisco. So we had some conferences, but mostly we discussed things. We discussed racism. And we discussed Hitler. And we had a very big discussion about the non-aggression treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany. We had a really heated discussion about that. But generally we were discovering the world outside of our community, the whys and wherefores of injustices. And socialism. But it was not like the Sansei activists during the Vietnam War era where discussion was on such a higher theoretical level. Even my politics today have matured, thanks to being active in the Asian movement. Back then, our discussions were on a very primitive level. But it was at a price, because we were red-baited.

**Amerasia:** Can you describe the red-baiting?

**Kazu:** People in the community completely ignored us. I certainly felt the alienation because we [my family] had always been active in the community. Of course, it was a shock to the community when my sister Nori became a
Communist because she was a Phi Beta Kappa. And my older sister [Mary] was the community's pianist. So here was this family, and all of a sudden the daughters were all "Reds." I can still remember the hurt I felt when friends completely turned their heads when we walked down the street. And people were always wondering what was going on in the Ikeda house because the lights were always on late at night. Probably they thought we were very immoral. [laughs] We were always having a lot of people coming through the house at all hours.

**Amerasia:** How about red-baiting and the Young Democratic Club? Since most of the members were not Communists, how did they deal with the community?

**Kazu:** The people in the club were the very kind who said, "So what! We don't care." You had to have that kind of strength to go against the community. And really, we didn't care because we were having such a good stimulating time in our discussions.

**Amerasia:** There's an interesting statement by James Omura in a recent issue of *Amerasia Journal*. He mentions that he had talked with Larry Tajiri, who stated that the Young Democratic Club was expelled from the State Democratic organization for its Communist affiliation.9

**Kazu:** I didn't know that! I don't remember it ever coming up. It may have happened, but by that time we didn't care. We wanted to be an independent group—so probably nobody gave it a second thought.

**Amerasia:** What happened to the Young Democratic Club members? Did they continue with political activity?

**Kazu:** In camp—I went to Topaz—we had a small group of very close friends—people like Mine Okubo, Eddie Iino, Ernie Iiyama and Bob Tsuda. In fact, some of them stayed over at our place so that we could go to camp together. And even in the camps, we were the ones who used to go to hassle the administration at two o'clock in the morning because we were unhappy about something. We wanted to hassle them. So in that sense, some former club members did stay active. And it's interesting, because I've noticed that those who were active in the club also had children who tended to become political.

**Amerasia:** What other types of issues confronted progressive Nisei in the camps?

**Kazu:** At the time of the formation of the 442nd Combat Team, our camp was really split. Those of us who were political took the stand that we should not urge men to volunteer for the Army because that was an individual decision, but after someone volunteered, we would speak up in support of him because they were so badly treated. There was a very pro-
Japan group in camp. Some who volunteered for the Army did so from idealism; they didn't want to have to tell their children that "I didn't do a thing about this war."

*Amerasia*: Your husband, Tak Iijima, was associated with the 442nd. And before the war, he was also a member of the Young Democratic Club.

*Kazu*: Tak was drafted into the Army about a month before Pearl Harbor. So when they formed the 442nd, he was in the cadre group which did the training. He was a first sergeant. Before the war, he was a musician. He was choir director and organist for the Christian church. He went to San Francisco State College. He was very idealistic. We were married in 1942, and so when he was sent to Mississippi to train the 442nd, I got permission to leave Topaz to join him. We were about the first Nisei to arrive—it was a small town called Hattiesburg. And that's a whole different story—my experiences in Mississippi. Because at the time everything was "black-white," "black-white." So horrendous. The Blacks had to walk in the gutter. We had to stay with a white minister and his family because the housing situation was terrible. And Tak and I would have these big arguments with them about the Blacks. And I was a rebel all throughout. One day, I was on a bus. The Blacks were allowed only the last seat, and a black woman came in who was pregnant, so I got up to give her my seat. The bus driver stopped the bus, and there was dead silence. But I wasn't going to give up what I had started. The Black woman was so frightened, she wouldn't even sit down. So finally a white woman said, "Look, you sit with me, and she'll be able to sit there." So I did that. And the kind of arguments that we used to have with that minister at home. We used to play Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson records. It was interesting because when we finally moved out—when we got our own apartment—I got a knock on the door, and it was the minister's wife, and she said, "Would you please let me borrow the Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson records? I want to play them for my women's group." And so I felt we made a dent with her. But with her husband [the minister], we got nowhere. He felt that the Blacks were "ribs of Adam" or whatever.

*Amerasia*: Did you remain in Mississippi throughout the war years?

*Kazu*: No, after Tak was sent to Europe with the 442nd, I went to New York City. Tak was always very close to his men. He was offered a position as lieutenant in the field, but he refused it. He said he wanted to stay with the men. After he got out of the Army, he joined me in New York. He wanted to go into conducting, but when he went to Columbia Teachers College, the director told him, "You're one of the best conductors I've seen, but you're not going to get a job, so forget it. So teach." By that time, we had our two little children, and we lived in a five-story walk-up. And we were so poor that he was selling his books every semester as soon as his
classes ended. And he was selling blood, just to make the money to feed the kids. And he couldn't get a job—he was a veteran and he had an M.A. from Columbia Teachers College, but he couldn't get a job. He finally worked as an elevator operator. It was a continuation of the good old days. We moved to Connecticut for a short time to live in a community that had no discrimination according to race. There were some Communists involved—Paul Robeson's wife was involved. So they gave us a very good deal for a house. We thought it would be great to raise the children in an atmosphere where there was no discrimination. Tak applied for a job there in the school system and was turned down. So he took three or four jobs in New York and commuted just to keep up our house. Also, we were both on the board of directors for this community. The members all had political backgrounds—there were labor organizers, and CP members. And it became one of those real "show" communities. Then an issue came up—the community owned a large plot of land, and the city wanted to build a school. We also got an offer from a large builder who wanted to make a commercial building and boat basin. And how do you think they voted? Tak and I and another person were the only ones who voted for the school. So Tak said, "To hell with this! I don't get to see the kids, and here's this community that's supposed to be liberal, but won't back a school." So we moved back to New York and we sent the kids to public school.

Making Waves on People's Consciousness

*Amerasia:* You are one of the few Nisei who continued active political work from the 1930s through the 1980s. Why did some Nisei continue with political activism and others not?

*Kazu:* The only answer I can give is a personal one. Minn [Matsuda] and I were always very close because we worked at the same place—we ate lunch together and we socialized together. We always maintained a close relationship, and we always talked politics. And we were inspired by the black movement. That's why we decided to start the first Asian group in New York City, Asian Americans for Action in 1969. We contacted old political Nisei friends and we got no response. We were furious. The only response we got from a Nisei was from Yuri [Kochiyama], and we didn't even know her at the time, but we had heard that she was active in the black movement. We didn't get a stir—not even money—from old political friends.

*Amerasia:* Looking back over the political activities of the Nisei in the 1930s, how would you assess things? For example, Karl Yoneda has estimated that there were only about 200 Japanese American Communists in the 1930s. Some historians might write that off as insignificant. What do you think?
Interview with Kazu Iijima

Kazu: I think it is definitely important! It took a lot of strength, believe me, to be a Communist in those days. And even though we were treated with such contempt, I think we did make some waves on people’s consciousness.

Amerasia: How would you assess the impact of the Young Democratic Club? We can look at it in two ways, both on the community at the time and also in the history of Japanese Americans. On the one hand, you could say that since the club was very small, it did not have very much impact. But can you also say that it had no impact at all on Japanese American history?

Kazu: I think the fact that we were the only group that protested the Evacuation is very significant. There was a group of us who cared about what was going on about the world and in our country. We were one of the first political groups formed among the Nisei. So to that extent, historically, we had some significance.

Amerasia: Finally, how would you assess your own life? Are you satisfied with the political direction that you took—or if you had the chance, would you have done things differently?

Kazu: Well, I hope I would take the same path. But I wish I hadn’t been so quite untogether during the 1930s. I think it was the result of the experience with racism and all that. If I had to do it all over again, I hope that I would have learned. But generally, I’m pretty happy that to this day, I’m still politically active and that my children are politically aware. So while there are many improvements that I could have made, generally my life has been okay.

NOTES

1. Describing Kando Ikeda as simply a pro-Japan nationalist is not entirely accurate. According to Yuji Ichioka, Ikeda was a complex figure. He ardently supported Japan, but he also spoke out on behalf of local community issues. For example, in 1919 Ikeda at a large community rally severely criticized the Japanese government for its stand in terminating the “picture bride” arrangement with the U.S. government. Ikeda was active in the Oakland Buddhist Church and the local Japanese language school. In his newspaper, he wrote many articles regarding the education of the young Nisei generation.

2. The Black Nation Thesis was developed in the late 1920s by the Comintern by Soviet nationality experts and Black American Communist Harry Haywood. The thesis defined Blacks in the United States as an oppressed nation which had the right of self-determination in those areas of the South where they formed a majority. The thesis had a dramatic impact on the work of the U.S. Communist Party in the years immediately following its formulation, leading to an intensification
of Party work in black communities. For a full discussion of its impact, see Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York, 1983).


4. Ibid., 115.
5. Ibid., 118.
6. Ibid., 116. For a fuller discussion of Earl Browder's leadership of the U.S. Communist Party, see Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1982); Joseph Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943–1957* (Berkeley, 1972); and Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York, 1960). Earl Browder served as General Secretary of the U.S. Communist Party from 1934 until he was ousted from office in 1945. Shortly thereafter he was expelled from the Party. Under Browder's leadership, the Party initiated major changes in political orientation and organizational structure. Working from the slogan "Communism Is Twentieth Century Americanism," Browder promoted active support for the New Deal and President Roosevelt. By the late 1930s, the Party had closed down its factory-based units and restructured itself along county and assembly districts, closely resembling traditional American political institutions. By the early 1940s the Party had stepped back from its militant defense of democratic rights for Blacks and other minorities. In 1944, the Party liquidated itself, reforming as the Communist Political Association. The CPA—headed by Browder—described itself as an organization following in the "traditions of Washington, Jefferson, Paine, Jackson, and Lincoln, under the changed conditions of modern industrial society." The group's constitution made adherence to any group that "conspires or acts to subvert, undermine, weaken or overthrow any or all institutions of American democracy" an offense punishable by immediate expulsion from the CPA.

7. Democratic centralism is the Leninist form of Party organization representing a "fusion of centralism with proletarian democracy." See Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism* (Peking, 1971). In theory, under democratic centralism, Party leadership reaches decisions after full discussion of questions by the membership. The decision is implemented with the complete discipline of all levels of the Party. The individual is subordinate to the organization, the minority to the majority, the lower levels to the higher level, and the entire Party to the Central Committee. For a discussion of the relationship between the U.S. Communist Party leadership to its rank-and-file during the late 1930s, see Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War*.
