

Aleuts recall horrors of relocation

By BILL HESS
Tundra Times Staff

[Editor's note: During World War II, more than 850 U.S. citizens of Aleut descent were evacuated from their homes in the Aleutian Chain and the Pribilof Islands and were placed in relocation camps located in Southeast Alaska.]

After almost 40 years, a special presidential/congressional commission is now looking into this episode of American history and also into the internment of American citizens of Japanese descent into concentration camps. Last week, *The Tundra Times* followed members of the commission as they held hearings in Anchorage, Unalaska, and St. Paul. These hearings represented the first opportunity since the war that many of the Aleut survivors have had to relate their experiences, experiences heretofore unknown by the great majority of the American public.

The *TUNDRA TIMES* will take a comprehensive look at these hearings and the testimony brought out, as well as other related material, in the next issue, to be published September 30, 1981.

Aleut American citizens received poorer treatment from their government during World War II than did enemy prisoners-of-war during evacuations which were poorly managed, inhumane, and even unnecessary, and amends must be made.

So said Aleut survivors of these evacuations during testimony heard last week before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians in Anchorage, Unalaska, and the Pribilof Island community of St. Paul.

The commission seemed largely sympathetic as it listened

to Aleuts who told of being uprooted with as little as two-hours notice from their homes before being moved to abandoned canneries and mine sites in Southeast Alaska.

They spoke of horrible living conditions where several hundred people shared a single outdoor toilet; where food and medical care were scarce and where as many as 25 percent of their people died.

They told of returning to their homes and churches only to find them devastated, looted, and even destroyed, not by enemy troops but by American military personnel. Although they were often promised reparations for these damages, in reality, they received little help of any kind in rebuilding their lives and economies.

All who testified felt that reparations should be made.

Some called for monetary settlement, some for monuments preserving the rainy southeast cemeteries where their dead lie and some for inclusion of their story in history books which have so far overlooked it. Virtually everyone called for steps to insure that no similar event be allowed to ever take place in this country again.

Several Aleut churches had been destroyed or damaged during the war, and many icon-holy paintings often dating back to 17th century Russia had been taken from many of those which survived. Many Aleuts asked that money be made available to rebuild and repair churches.

The "madness of war" was frequently brought up by some of the commissioners during the hearing. Justice Arthur Gold-

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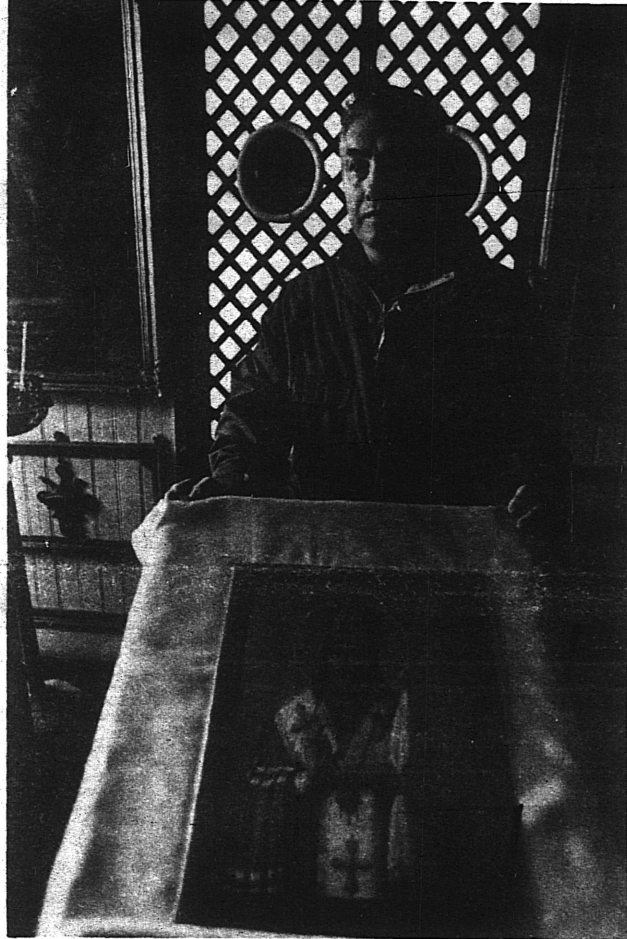


PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Father I.V. Gromoff, a member of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians stands in the midst of sacred paintings in the Russian Orthodox chapel in Unalaska. The icons here were buried by the Aleut faithful during the war, and thus escaped the theft and vandalism suffered by many of those in other chapels.

"We suffered for nothing"

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burg, who chaired the hearings in Anchorage, pointed out that many of the soldiers stationed in the Aleutians were none too comfortable themselves, and were faced with boredom and hard living conditions. Despite this, it was agreed by virtually everyone, including the commission, that what had happened to the Aleuts was unjustified and that reparations of some sort should be made.

Alice Petrivelli vividly recalls the 12th year of her life when she was forced to leave her home in Atka. It was on June 14, 1942. On June 3, Japanese warplanes had bombed Dutch Harbor, near the village of Unalaska, hitting Naval facilities and destroying the community hospital, which has not been rebuilt. It is the only hospital which was not rebuilt.

Three days later, they captured the American beachhead at Kiska Island, and took all 10 Navy personnel there as prisoners. On June 8, the Japanese landed in Attu, took 42 Aleuts prisoner, killed one government civilian employee and captured another.

"The Navy ordered the Aleut people to go to their fish camps," Petrivelli recalled. "They did not tell us why we had to leave the village." After a week, they ran out of food at the camp, so some of the adults went to the village to get more. While they were gone, a Japanese plane flew by and those left at the camp took cover as they had been instructed to.

After the plane left, the others returned with no food. "That same evening while we were gathering grass, etc., for camouflage, we saw flames in the village," Petrivelli testified. "We thought they were burning the two planes which were put out of commission that day. After a while, the flames got bigger...we realized the village was being burned."

Not long after, Petrivelli was picked up with other villagers for a trip which would end in an old abandoned hering saltery called Killisnoo, which would be her home until May of 1944 - long after the Japanese threat had ended in the area, and long after Secretary of War Henry Stimson had given final approval for all Aleuts to return home.

For many, the evacuation brought tragedy. Michael Lekanoff, Sr. recalled how his 14-year-old sister had been stricken with the flu even before the family received their two-hours notice that they had to leave their home in St. George. She was admitted to the hospital aboard the UST DELAROF.

After the Pribilof people

arrived in Funter Bay, a hell hole where buried bodies would float up from boggy graves to be fed upon by bears, his family sought medical attention for her. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Agent Dan Benson denied their request, Lekanoff testified. "My parents took it upon themselves to seek help and found a fishing boat which was anchored in the bay to give assistance. The fishermen, feeling very sorry of the situation, granted the wishes of my parents and took them to Juneau." It was there that Irene died.

Philemon Tutiaikoff, who is Chairman of the Board of the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association, expressed great displeasure that in many instances, such as at Unalaska, only persons of one-eighth Aleut blood or more were required to leave while the non-Aleuts were allowed to stay behind and pretty much take

over. Non-Aleuts bleed just as fast when cut as do Aleuts, it was pointed out.

For reasons such as this, many of the Aleuts who testified stated that they did not believe the evacuations had been necessary, but had just been done for the sake of military convenience.

It was noted that many of the residents of the Pribilofs were literally forced to return to their islands to harvest seals for the government, and were later returned to Funter Bay when the harvest was completed. "Since when does the government send civilians into a war zone," Larry Merculief questioned during the St. Paul hearings.

Agafon Krukoff, president of the Aleut Corporation, expressed his displeasure with the way in which news on the hearings had been covered by Alaska newmedia. He claimed that they

missed the main point of the testimony. "Some called all the ordeals suffered by both the Japanese-Americans and our Aleut-Americans the 'craziness of war,' and dismiss that ugly portion of American history

as excusable.

Not many of our people until recently, including myself, realized the ultimate insult of the entire story: the evacuations were not necessary! The Aleuts suffered for nothing!"