

AN AMERICAN WITH A JAPANESE FACE

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revised
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article

The following article, written by "an American with a Japanese face," presents the observations and reactions to the problem of resettlement of an individual who was among the thousands who were evacuated from their homes to barbed-wire assembly centers. The writer is a nisei, born in Seattle, just before the end of the last war. He was educated in Seattle schools and attended Whitman College, Walla Walla, graduating in 1940. At college his classmates, elected him president of the senior class, and he was a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

Greener from the rain, the wooded hillside catches the morning sun. The air is cool and clean. By our window a huge locust tree, which has felt manly springs, is budding once more.

Yesterday the old tree was full of blue-jays that sat and quarreled. Today there are only raindrops, clinging like glass beads to the tangle of twigs.

It is seven-thirty. We have had breakfast and my wife is washing the dishes. I am putting on my tie and coat and in a few minutes shall start my daily walk to the office.

The pavement is wet this morning, glistening like diamonds where the sunlight falls across it. It is good to be out, walking past houses with neat lawns, flowering tulips and greening hedges.

It is good to have somewhere to go in the morning, a place to work--and in the evening, somewhere to return. That may sound strange, it is so commonplace. But it is not so for me. Only three weeks ago we were behind barbed wire of a War Relocation Authority project, a drab desert city of tarpaper barracks.

I am an American with a Japanese face, one of 60,000 nisei-Americans born in this country of Japanese parents. The chronological facts of evacuation from our homes and the subsequent camp life have been publicized from time to time by various periodicals.

When the treacherous enemy struck Pearl Harbor, the frenzy on the coast whipped the racial coals which had been smouldering for a generation. Along with our alien parents, we were condemned as sneaking fifth columnists and saboteurs biding our time to spring for the kill.

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Possibility of invasion by the Japanese hurried the cry for our evacuation. Those were confusing days and, in spite of our resignation, it was a relief when the ordered movements began. By the middle of May, 1942, 110,000 coastal residents were behind barbed wire of hastily constructed assembly centers.

The soldiers who evacuated us were young and courteous, reminding me of college friends in the service. They aided the old, patted excited little children, and as we boarded buses with scant belongings they assured us, "It won't be too bad. We'll get this mess over with in a hurry and we'll all go home again." They were a credit to our country, and they did a difficult job well.

We moved in strictest co-operation with the Army and its agency, the Wartime Civilian Control Administration. We believed if our being removed was a military necessity designed to help our nation, then it was our contribution to its wartime welfare.

By mid-summer the movements from these miserable stopping-off places to more spacious relocation camps in the barren inland desert had begun. We were happy to leave the inadequacies of temporary encampment. Formerly it had been a state fair grounds; its numerous booths, grandstand, and roller-coaster tracks were mute witnesses to remind us of happier days. After our transfer, the partitioned sheds were condemned as unfit for proposed Army quarters.

There were many physical inconveniences of the new center, but most of us never lost sight of the only things which mattered--our country was at war, fighting totalitarianism in a desperate battle. Its complete victory over Japan and Germany was what mattered.

Contrary to accusations given wide publicity, we were never pampered, never coddled. Our living was crude and almost always limited to a plane of bare necessity. When we read reports in the papers of our luxurious quarters and lavish food, we resented deeply these untruths by ignorant politicians. When several Senators proposed investigation of conditions we encouraged just that.

Our inconveniences and misfortunes ceased to bother us. How could it be otherwise when we learned of the courage and sacrifice endured on Bataan and Corregidor and in the homes from which these heroes had gone. Most of us never lost faith in America, though sometimes faith in ourselves weakened.

If this was to be our home for the duration, it was a test of our courage and ingenuity. We worked to improve our homes, to develop recreation and to organize education. The WRA officials were helpful and most eager.

But there was trouble brewing in the centers, the kind of thing only nisei completely understand. Months ago, in the hysteria after Pearl Harbor, nisei were accused as disloyal and dangerous, because they would not indicate which among them and their parent generation were tools of the enemy. We suspected there were some who would choose Japan and its emperor to America and Democracy. There are bad apples in every barrel.

But we did not know who they were. We did not find out until we had been thrown indiscriminately within the perimeter of barbed wire. We did not know where to look, whom to watch until slowly

from dark corners of boiler rooms, and behind barracks, came ugly discontent and seeds of agitation.

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They said, you nisei have boasted of citizenship as Americans. What has it done for you? Now you have finally begun to learn that you are no better than aliens who are denied that citizenship. You see that Democracy is only a word, something to be looked upon from a distance, never to have.

Some young nisei with confused minds were turned by this talk. The receptive weakness was there--bitterness and resentment of evacuation.

In Poston Center, Ariz., and Manzanar and Tule Lake in California, the breach had widened between the handful of pro-Axis and the handful who were actively vociferously American. The majority were unconcerned as usual. The split was not between issei and nisei. There were some of both on either side.

Indicative of the hostile circumstances was the Pearl Harbor anniversary riot in Manzanar and beatings in other centers. In poston, seven thugs entered the room of a sleeping family at 2 a.m. to attack the nisei leader who had always been outspoken of his Democratic ideals and faith in America. With masks over their faces, they broke down the door, fell upon their victim in typical fascist manner. They were properly prosecuted.

The Manzanar riot followed attempt of minority pro-Axis forces to launch a celebration of the treacherous anniversary. This infuriated many local nisei. Trouble followed and military law was clapped on the project. Shooting by military police, resulting in death and injury to a few. It was during the pitch of excitement that 14 young nisei Boy Scouts surrounded a flagpole, armed them-

selves with rocks and defied the Axis agitators to haul down the American flag.

These incidents opened many eyes. The Government and public realized the extreme danger of having good placed with bad without individual regard.

Other centers were not free of feeling, altho the breach was never as evident. The unavoidable closeness of common existence could not help but bring to a head the counter-principles. During those weeks more than one sheep was converted to the goats. Psychologically helpful in this was the reality of citizens, accused of no crime, being held inside a fence of barbed wire interspaced with watchtowers.

Nisei are young as a group. Their age hovers above 20. They have undergone much in being uprooted from their homes and placed in camps. Before the solution is reached, they will undergo much more.

The procedure of resettlement to outside communities has just been instituted. It was initiated about Thanksgiving and was slow to get under way. Purpose and plans were indistinct. Evacuees were skeptical about benefits. What interest there was suffered because of shifting policies and red tape.

Employment offers in the first months of resettlement were scant, mostly menial. The WRA, looking out for its charges, discouraged evacuees from accepting jobs below their capabilities. Stories of unfriendly reception, housing difficulties and high costs of living were not brightening. Negotiations for employment were almost entirely by mail and required strict supervision.

Applicants for clearance were forced to wait months while their papers were held up in Washington, D.C. Thorough investigation of both employer and evacuee were necessary. For a time resettlement

was remote and it seemed only college students continuing education could leave the centers.

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Then came the announcement from Secretary of War Stimson on Jan. 28, 1943--a special combat team composed of loyal Japanese-Americans would be formed and enlistments would be sought in the relocation centers.

Most encouraging was the making public of a letter to Secretary Stimson from President Roosevelt, who had just returned from his historic Casablanca meeting. It said, "The proposal . . . has my full approval. . . no loyal citizen of the United States should be denied the democratic right to exercise the responsibilities of his citizenship regardless of ancestry. . . Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart; . . . Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy. . . "

The Army recruiting team arrived, including a young nisei sergeant, one of over 5000 Americans with Japanese faces in the Army before nisei were barred from selective service. Offices were established and preliminary explanatory meetings were held in each section of the sprawling camp with its 10,000 population.

The War Deptment made its idea clear. Rather than dilute the propoganda effectiveness, at home and abroad, of 5000 or 10,000 fighting nisei Americans by diffusing them in an army of 8,000,000, it was better concentrated in a segregated unit. Some nisei understood, were far-seeing enough to realize this as their special chance to show who they were and in what they believed. Some did not understand. Others who might have volunteered under other circum-

stances hesitated to leave dependents as Government wards.

Many declined to volunteer, the majority among these indicating they would wait to be reinstated by selective service. Of those declining, a percentage is known to have refused forswearing allegiance to Japan. This group should never be released from watchful custody. These nisei should be treated not as citizens or as aliens but as enemies.

Enlistees included many older nisei, married and with children. They realized there was something to be done and were determined to create a permanent place in America for their posterity. The younger have begun to see the light. They needed leadership and education. If the recruiting procedure is repeated, many more nisei will volunteer.

It is interesting to note that Minidoka Center in Idaho, consisting of evacuees from the Pacific Northwest, a region more free than California of racial antagonism, had 300 volunteers, outstripping other centers. California nisei have always been more conscious of racial feeling through segregation, anti-alien land laws and stringent economic measures. The southern nisei have had to be staunch to stand up under attacks of skeptics and violent pro-Axis Japanese.

The Northwest nisei knew through their everyday associations that Democracy can be put into action and that is worth fighting for. When the postwar democratizing begins, a good starting point will be here at home--in generous quantities.

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The West Coast Japanese problem is far from solved. Gradually evacuees will be resettled in communities outside. The present egress is a trickle. The cumbersome procedure is being eliminated

altho Government investigation is still strict. Only those clearly established as sound and useful Americans are being released.

Both nisei and issei are eligible for resettlement. But the non-citizen parents are hesitating to leave. Some have accepted jobs, received clearance by passing the stringent scrutiny of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These few are working at their simple trades and as domestics and farm helpers. Others may follow suit slowly as word comes from others that all is well. Communities will have to be understanding of issei. They are non-citizens, most of them only because they have been prohibited from naturalization thru Congressional action. Among this aging group are those who have spent their best years in America, cutting all ties with the land of their birth. They have raised and educated their families, teaching children to be good Americans. In this foreign land they have had many heartaches and have seen many dreams fade away.

Most nisei reaching an age of independence and worthy of the opportunity should be induced to leave for employment and a chance to find a place in America. The solution should be reached thru intensive aid by Government agencies for initial adjustment economically and socially. The solution is not mass deportation to Japan of all issei and nisei as some vociferous chauvinists have advocated. This would be final admission that Democracy has failed and all the sacrifices in its behalf have been in vain.

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Dispersal of evacuees must be into the cities and town, villages and farms of the Midwest and the East. A concentration in any section can only cause recurrence of distrust and retarding of assimilation. Large-scale return at the war's end to former homes on

the Pacific Coast is impossible and inadvisable. Almost all evacuees have disposed of property, lost their businesses. They are economically unprepared to return. Should they do so in any numbers, they would be defeating every hope of vast resettlement, Americanization and assimilation now getting under way.

In some quarters, chiefly nisei, there is concern over constitutionality of the evacuation of citizens. Pending test cases are scheduled for early judgment in the United States Supreme Court, having been referred to that body by a bank of judges in the Federal Court of Appeals in San Francisco last month.

Nisei who look ahead are willing to forget the past until a more propitious time. Court judgment would be meager benefit, no matter what the decision. The only victory would be a moral one. If nisei evacuation is technically nullified, it would only remove in a technical sense, the stigma implied by the movement. Evacuees would still be in centers. They could not return to the coast, even if it were advisable. They could not be released from the camps to go eastward without careful planning, and that is well under way.

In the final analysis, war and evacuation will have wiped out in a flash the socially undesirable ghetto Lil' Tokyos on the Pacific Coast. It will have scattered Americans with Japanese faces across the country, giving them a chance to prove their assimilability. For this, nisei must be thankful.

Illustrative of general nisei feeling in the WRA projects is a story from a California center. A little child after one week in concentration said to his mother, "Mommy, I'm tired of this place, let's go back to America."

My wife and I have taken the opportunity and are now in the first stages of resettlement in a Midwestern community which had

never had nisei. When its weekly newspaper hired me, by mail, sight unseen, to take the place of an army-inducted news editor, it was expressing its willingness to participate in a liberal experiment. I was happy to be a partyer in the trial. It has not been without interesting episodes.

Three subscriptions out of 3700 were canceled when residents heard of negotiations for employment of a "Jap rat". Rumors flowed swiftly on my arrival. The best one said the News had imported a Jap spy. One church had a stormy session in a meeting of elders, because a suggestion had been made for inviting my wife and me to worship there. Two war workers walked out of a restaurant because of my presence.

On the other hand, people have gone out of their way to be kind to us. In spite of a housing congestion we have a neat little apartment. We have been invited to homes for dinner and attended church and concerts with new friends. At the conclusion of one Sunday service, one fourth of the congregation came over to introduce themselves to us. People have been interested and friendly enough to stop us and talk to us in stores and on the streets. Neighbors have made us feel at home with the trifling thoughtful things that neighbors can do--sharing food, flowers from their gardens, exchanging recipes with my wife.

~~It is with deep appreciation we walk in the evening along~~

On Saturday afternoon, after I have cashed my week's check and pasted in my war stamps, we go shopping with ration books in hand. We work a victory garden on shares with our landlady.

It is with deep appreciation we walk in the evening along quiet streets, past homes with blue stars in their windows. We hear crick-

ets making conversation and birds singing vesper songs. In the West there are no watchtowers, no fences with barbed wire, only the colors of dusk, houses warm with light, and in the sky, the evening star.