

NISEI AND ISSEI FIND THAT THIS IS AMERICA

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Six bewildered and hungry Japanese timidly came out of their five-day hiding. On the day Japan executed her sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, these Japanese locked themselves in their room and refused to come out, remaining in this self-imprisonment for five days without food. When questioned about their strange behavior, they replied;

"We were afraid of the mob."

This fear of mob violence and persecution rose out of the smoke of Pearl Harbor like a goblin, haunting the Japanese living in America. We must have been seeing too many movies about German persecution of innocent aliens within the borders to the Reich. We felt certain America, too, would be demented by war hysteria and we waited fearfully for the terrible persecution to be loosed upon us.

During the first days of war our fears were strengthened, as evidences of malevolence cropped up here and there. Rocks were thrown through the store-windows; ruffians beat up Japanese men in the dark streets; one elderly American woman even spat at a Japanese girl.

Our fears were so strong that very few of us dared venture out into the streets at night. A theater, located in the heart of our Japanese community which enjoyed the patronage of Japanese in the pre-war days, was almost empty every night. In desperation the manager advertised in the newspaper; "Transportation service will be offered to anyone wishing to attend our theater."

Next to mob violence, we trembled at the mention of the FBI. At that time "FBI" had the same dreadful significance as "Gestapo" had to aliens in Germany. Our fears increased as we listened to rumors that the FBI had tapped our telephone wires and that they would come and arrest us if we conversed in Japanese. Someone warned us the FBI had a man stationed outside every house, listening and waiting for us to "Banzai Hirohito" so they could rush in and grab us. Even within their own homes the elders talked in low whispers.

All was not rumor. Hundreds of men were actually being arrested by the FBI, mostly men who had been leaders in the Japanese community. This persecution-fear hit me right between the eyes on the night of December seventh, only a matter of hours after the war began.

About midnight there came a knock at my door. My heart was pounding excitedly as I wrapped my bathrobe around me and went to the door. A husky policeman stood before my drowsy eyes.

"Hello, Ted," he greeted in a low voice.

I looked at him closer. It was Pat, a young cop who played first base on our sandlot team several years ago.

"I guess it's your father we want," he said looking at a name he had scribbled in his notebook.

In silence I led Pat and his three companions to my father's room. They were polite and gentle but they had their orders to search the house and bring back any incriminating documents they might find. Then they took my father away. Pat grinned uncomfortably;

"Don't worry, He'll be back in the morning."

In spite of that assurance, I know my mother did not sleep that night. she feared the worst, and so did I.

That gave us an inkling of our fate. We were sure, sooner or later, the rest of us would be driven into a Concentration Camp, to suffer tortures and agonies for the duration.

Early in 1942, rumors of Evacuation darkened our already gloomy community. Evacuation--that single word struck terror into our hearts. We were being driven to the barracks and the barracks were out of our homes,

Was the Army going to be so merciless as to drive us out of our homes, forcing us out of our homes, forcing us to face the wrath and persecution of the American people wherever we went? We were resigned to the fate of homeless nomads, hated everywhere and wanted nowhere.

At least that part of our fears was erased when the Army Order officially came out, definitely announcing the Army had no intention of chasing us out of our homes without providing a place for us to go. That meant only one thing to us--- Concentration Camp.

As our Evacuation Day approached, our persecution complex increased. Nervously we waited for the soldiers to swoop down on us and forcefully eject us from our homes and drive us into exile at the bayonet-point.

Our perplexity mounted as the Government showed no signs of persecution. We were even given an opportunity to move out voluntarily and go wherever we desired before the deadline date. Those of us who had no place to go were encouraged by the Government to settle our personal and business affairs before we moved into the camp. The Government set up an office where the bankers and Government officials aided us in selling or leasing our properties. For those belongings which we wished to keep, the Government gave us storage-space which will be guarded by the Government agents while we are away.

If there was any "persecution" it came from unreasonable landlords, petty and county officials and other small individuals. A certain American landlord, without warning, ordered one of my friends out of her house. She, with her three sons, asked why and he replied;

"I don't want any Japs living in my house."

Yet, only a few months before, he had told them they could stay as long as they wanted to. She appealed to his decency and begged him to let her stay until Evacuation, but he was stubborn and she had to go.

Even the county officials began immediate assessment of all business properties owned by Japanese. When the assessment had been completed, they began immediate collection. Under ordinary conditions the assessment should have been made during the following two or three months, and payment need not have been called for until twelve months later.

Gas and light companies sent their agents to our homes; small business men demanded immediate settlement of all outstanding accounts. Even the newsboys came to collect. A Chinese lad who had taken over the route from a Japanese boy came to me and demanded that I pay in advance. When I told him it had always been my practice to pay later in the month, he bluntly told me: "You guys are going to be kicked out pretty soon."

At last, our day to be "kicked out" came. Some believed we would be taken away on truck; more pessimistic ones expected to be dumped into box-cars.

All this rumors were spiked when a caravan of large buses with upholstered seats rolled into position to take us on. Another caravan of large vans stood by to take our baggage.

When we sank into our seats on Bus No. 18, the driver came down the aisle for a final check-up. My wife opened her bag, looking for the "tickets." The driver smiled; "No ticket this time. Its free."

Our free ride was over when we were unloaded in our Camp. They did not call it Concentration Camp, but Assembly Center. Under any name it was a prison-camp to us.

We felt our fears were not unfounded when we were herded into a single-room apartment in a long barrack, with single sheets of shiplaps, full of knot-holes and cracks, to shelter us from rain and wind. Our apprehension grew when they handed us large canvas bags, and directed us to a straw-pile. As we filled our bags with straw to make our own mattresses, we imagined allsorts of inhuman treatment that might be visited upon us in the days to come.

As the days passed, however, the only tortures we felt were in our minds. They fed us sufficiently; even a special kitchen was set up to feed the babies and those

whose physical condition made it necessary to go on special diet. We were even paid a little, if we wanted to work, and we were given monthly allowance of a few dollars to buy our small sundries. A full equipped hospital, erected right in our Camp, gave us such medical care we needed.

All these conveniences did not mean we were being pampered but, on the other hand, we were definitely not being mistreated. The persecution we anticipated failed to materialize, but the fear of awful things to come still haunted us.

After several months of waiting in suspense and anxiety, we were moved to our Relocation Center, our permanent home for the duration. Again rumor played havoc with our minds. This "Relocation Center" was going to be an awful place, unfit for human existence. Some listened, panic-stricken, to the wild tales of how the Government was going to dump us in a wilderness, to die and rot.

Our train stopped at the edge of a wasteland. I saw one woman looking out the window at the arid, dismal sage-brush plain surrounding us on all sides. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she hugged her two children and bitterly mumbled: "We've come to hell."

With despair in our hearts, we took our first look at our home for the duration. The air around our Camp was gray with flying dust; our feet sank into the loose dirt as we trudged wearily to our apartment. Smells of stale dust and paint met us when we stepped into our single-room apartment, with no kitchen or running water, a bare room with no furniture of any kind. It was, indeed, a sorry sight.

As we familiarized ourselves with our surroundings, we began to feel a little different. Instead of a prison-camp, as we feared, ours was a miniature city, divided into blocks, each block housing about seventy-four families. In each block were a public dining-hall, laundry-room, shower-room, toilets and recreation hall. Everything in the way of allowing us to live as normally as possible under the adverse circumstances had been provided by the Government.

Our assumption that the Caucasian administrative staff up on the hill were our overseers, something like prison guards, received a jolt when these men did not stand over us with a gun or even a small club. By their words and deeds, they proved to us they were our advisers, looking after our interests, and working toward making this a fit place to live in.

One day, soon after our arrival here, one of the elder evacuees died and was to be buried in the graveyard. A crew of grave-diggers sweated through the hot afternoon and dug a grave. When they lowered the coffin into the grave, it was past five o'clock. They went home, expecting to finish the work next day. Later that evening, the project director and his assistant went out to the grave-yard to inspect the first grave. When they saw the coffin still bare, they rolled up their sleeves and filled the grave with dirt.

When one of the residents got lost out in the sage brush, these Caucasian administrators combed the surrounding country with the rest of us, looking for the lost man. Because of their willingness to take part in these unpleasant tasks, we learned very soon to look upon them with respect, and not with fear.

The Government, represented by these men, treats us, not as prisoners, but as colonists. From the beginning, they let it be known to us that this was going to be our city. We were to be allowed to govern this ourselves in a true democratic fashion. They were to stand by as advisers, ready to give us a helping hand whenever we needed it. Above all, they never used force to persuade us to work or do anything else.

Instead of shackling and persecution, we are given as much freedom as possible. One of the foremost freedoms is that of religion. Catholics attend their Masses without restriction; Protestants praise their Lord with no fear of intrusion; even Buddhists worship their Buddha openly and without fear of arrest or torture.

Our children are given the same educational opportunities as any children in America. Two elementary schools and one high school are staffed by experienced teachers, who must meet a high standard of requirements before they can qualify. Those who are able to finance themselves are given the privilege of continuing their education in some inland university.

To us, who expected persecution these leniencies seem incredible. It was not

exactly the way we had heard it from those who had suffered at the hands of the Nazis. No back-breaking labor; no whipping posts; but sympathy and understanding of our difficult and delicate position.

It now dawns on me that America is truly the land of justice, where not even the strain of war can distort the high ideals of justice for all. For the sake of national unity and safety it was necessary to remove us from vital defense zones, but America showed the rest of the world there is a humane way of doing it, which is not conditioned by race-theories.

The most gratifying part of this whole well-constructed evacuation plan is the relocation program. Upon presentation of proof of a job waiting for us outside, we are given indefinite leave-clearance, when we can once again go into American society and live a normal life. In the meantime, WRA is making every effort to find jobs for most of us in the "outside" society, so that we can leave this Relocation Center and become a part of free America.

Life in the Relocation Center has renewed my faith in America. She is truly living up to her conviction of the democratic ideals of justice and fair play.

As the War Department said in permitting the Japanese-Americans to volunteer for service in the United States Army: "In any time of crisis, when national survival presents itself as the all-important issue, the best interests of the few must sometimes be temporarily sacrificed or disregarded for what seems the good of the many. The proof of a nation's good faith is to be found in whether it moves to restore full privileges at the earliest opportunity." I sincerely believe America is proving her good faith.

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RETURN OF THE NISEI

As the Dutch underground at last returned the stranded R. A. F. fliers to their homeland, and one of our aircraft is missing darkened into its final fade-out, a lady's voice echoed through the theatre, protesting in a strong German accent that her neighbor's baby was wiping its feet on her dress. The irritation manifest in the whispered "hushes" and exhortations to silence had nothing racial in it, but arose mainly because the lady was drowning out Donald Duck. To one of the audience, at least, it was a symbol of something that is very precious in American life; the willingness to judge a man, not by his race or his blood, but by what he proves himself to be.

All of that spirit of fairness will be needed if our nation is to deal worthily with one of the biggest problems arising from Pearl Harbor--the American Japanese. More than a hundred thousand of them, from the West Coast, have been uprooted by the exigencies of war and placed in vast camps. It does not take very much thought or investigation--and we say that advisedly--to see the grumbling, the resentment, the mismanagement, the ill-feeling that must necessarily be found where so many thousands have adapted themselves to a new life. It is only a deeper search and a more understanding approach that will reveal how much of this is superficial irritation, how much is due to the corroding effect of segregation how much to fears of what the future may bring. A vivid and convincing picture of this side of camp life is given in another part of this Review by one of the internees, Yoichi Matsuda.

Under the supervision of the F.B.I., many of the internees are being allowed to return to civil life. Their way will be hard. Stories are already current of their being excluded from restaurants in certain places. American should realize that the reception given to these people will show whether we take our social standards from Mein Kampf or the Declaration of Independence.