

FAREWELL TO LITTLE TOKYO

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The first question asked of Japanese American evacuees returning to relocation camps from trips to the "outside" is invariably: "How were you treated?" or "What is the public sentiment?" No group in America at the moment is more deeply conscious of public attitudes.

Two full years have now passed since the attack on Pearl Harbor. During this period Japanese Americans have completed a cycle of military-enforced evacuation and detention behind the barbed wire of relocation camps which no other American group has been forced to undergo. Stigmatized by ancestral identification with the enemy in the Pacific, they have suffered since that December Sunday an experience which has had a telling effect on their thinking as a group and as individuals.

The mass indignity of racial evacuation has sharpened a race consciousness born earlier of social discriminations and legal and extra-legal restrictions, and kept alive by the segregated nature of life in the Little Tokyos of the Pacific coast. Now this awareness of ethnic differences has been whetted by the indiscriminate nature of hate engendered by the conditions of war, by brutalities of the Japanese enemy, and by the incessant dinning of racist propaganda on the West Coast. The passage of angry resolutions against Japanese Americans, and of race legislation such as that aimed at preventing evacuee resettlement in Arkansas and Arizona has also been a contributing factor.

But more than anything else, detention in the mono-racial world of the relocation camps has intensified the racial hypersensitivity of Japanese Americans. Race was the only yardstick used by military authorities in determining candidates for wholesale evacuation. Except for the few non-Japanese wives and husbands who chose to accept the ignominy of life behind the barbed wire with their exiled mates, all evacuees residing in the camps are of Japanese ancestry. The conditions of detention make them subservient to those in administrative and supervisory capacities, who are Caucasians, and to the military police----also Caucasians ----at each camp. While the WRA has made a commendable effort to soften racial stratification between the evacuees and their supervisors with such euphemisms as "residents" and "appointive personnel," words alone cannot cauterize the mental sores left by this segregation. Among the evacuees are those who cannot rationalize their position with their belief in America and in the ideals of democracy. Some have lost faith. Grinding into the race consciousness of others is the fact that while Japanese American citizens were evacuated, white "enemy aliens" were not.

The indiscriminate nature of the evacuation program resulted also in pro-Americans and pro-Japanese being given identical treatment. WRA administrators, in the early stages of the relocation program, wanted to avoid friction and feared that trouble might arise out of any stimulation of existing tensions. Therefore little effort was made in many of the centers to encourage the pro-Americans. In the presence of M.P.'s and other appurtenances hinting of a concentration camp, the propaganda of the anti-Americans naturally flourished. Many who would never have questioned their political and cultural allegiance to America under normal conditions listened and succumbed. They have since made the long one-way journey to Tule Lake, the new segregation camp of the WRA.

The existence of this segregation center, whose residents will be detained for the duration and will presumably be deported when the war is over, is a tragic symbol of what may happen when 18,000 men, women, and children have lost faith in democracy. Many of these expatriates and repatriates----perhaps most of them----were once loyal American citizens and law-abiding aliens. Democracy failed them, as today it fails millions of other Americans who because of race, religious conviction, nationality background, or economic status know only its limited benefits.

But the American dream is strong, and it is strong in the minds and hearts of those who know but marginal treatment and wish for equality. The most remarkable fact that has come out of the evacuation is that so many were able to withstand the negative conditions of the relocation experience and are today leaving those camps with their faith whole and their belief in the basic rightness of their country unscarred.

II

To them, the train of circumstances set into motion by the evacuation now presents an opportunity to achieve, by strange contradiction, what they and other non-white groups have long sought ----fuller integration into American life through dispersal resettlement.

But this resettlement of loyal evacuees in non-military areas outside the camps----now accepted government policy----has been slow in getting under way. Strangely enough, the opening of the gates has not been answered by any pell-mell rush out of internment. Only 25,000 have so far resettled, though according to Dillon S. Myer, national director of the WRA, 70,000 more are eligible to leave the camps. This hesitancy in accepting freedom after a year behind barbed wire can probably be traced not alone to fear of economic insecurity or the dulling of initiative through institutionalization, but to the race consciousness developed by long months in a world where evacuees were the "white men's burden" in the colonialism of the relocation centers.

Resettlement will undoubtedly gain in momentum as stories of successful relocation belie the fears of the evacuees. For the Japanese Americans leaving the camps are not merely returning to American communities to resume their previous insular existence as a racial "minority." For the first time many are establishing themselves in the wider cultural pattern of the country. And as they begin their post-evacuation lives in communities and in areas which do not have a bitter history of prejudice against people of Oriental ancestry, they are, in many cases, experiencing a degree of social acceptance denied them in their former homes. Also, in the absence of a tradition of discrimination against them in inland America, and because of the manpower needs of war industries, Japanese Americans are entering employment fields heretofore closed to them.

This is the great paradox, the amazing contradiction which marks the wartime treatment of Americans of Japanese descent--- --the fact that the evacuees in losing a part of America are having opened to them the whole of it; that as the full force of the war effort is beginning to be expended against the Pacific enemy, circumstances should be auspicious for the integration of Japanese Americans into the main stream of American life. The WRA today has more than fifty local offices engaged in the single task of promoting their resettlement. Local committees of citizens and interested organizations have been formed in most of the key relocation areas to hasten their integration. Never before has a "minority" group had as distinct an opportunity to trumpet down the walls of racial isolation.

III

The opportunity is here. What will Japanese Americans do with it?

They can, of course, not do anything about it. They can retreat into the shell of self-inscribed exclusiveness. Or they can attempt honestly and creatively to break out of their present understandable racial hypersensitivity and adjust themselves to existing community molds, make real headway toward the goal of assimilation.

As I see it, whether they settle permanently away from their former areas of residence on the West Coast or return eventually to the farms and homes they left behind, they will have to become assimilated or become virtual pariahs. For the Little Tokyos have been shattered and---I hope---will not be put together again.

To bring about assimilation, I believe it is both a necessity and an obligation for the evacuees to align themselves, wherever they go in their post-evacuation world, with the progressive forces within American society and with the mass movement of all marginal groups toward the full realization of the American dream. They

will find support and encouragement on the race relations committees which are being set up in every part of the country in recognition of existing tensions; in the social action program of the churches, in progressive trade unions, in civil liberty groups and social welfare bodies. And, as they achieve a greater degree of assimilation, they will find their social needs are being met in the churches they attend, the trade unions to which they belong, the civic and service organizations they join; they will no longer feel the necessity of forming social and recreational organizations composed wholly of members of their own race.

It will be important, too, that as they establish themselves in new communities, the evacuees recognize the necessity for individual action whenever discrimination is pointed at them. They must learn that whenever they fail to demand for themselves the rights that have been denied them, they help set a pattern for further discrimination. The evacuee who accepts the simple edict "We don't employ 'Japs'" or "This union doesn't take 'Japs'" has failed not only himself but all who suffer discrimination. He fails also every organization that fights for his right to equal treatment. He must understand this.

He will find there are governmental and private agencies to help combat specific cases of discrimination such as these. If he meets discriminatory practices in employment, whether from employers or from unions, he has the same protection given workers of all creeds and races in the President's Executive Order 8802 on Fair Employment Practices. In connection with labor, he must remember that discrimination against those of Oriental ancestry is generally found only in the oldline AF of L unions and in the Railway Brotherhoods whose racial attitudes were crystallized during a time when "coolie" competition was an issue. These had-me-down policies, drawn in protest against cheap immigrant labor from the Oriental ancestry from working in certain war industries. Yet, in Utah recently, Federal machinery implementing the President's Executive Order was utilized successfully by evacuee workers who filed a complaint against an AF of L union with the War Manpower Commission and the FEPC. The evacuees were admitted into the union.

There has been no case of discrimination by the CIO against Japanese Americans. In fact, the CIO has actively assisted the resettlement program. The 200 members of the National Maritime Union, for example, who were languishing in the evacuee camps are again on the high seas. The CIO's attitude has done much to break down the resistance many Japanese Americans had formed to trade unions earlier because of the policy of segregation maintained on Oriental membership by the Teamsters and other unions active in fields in which Japanese Americans found employment prior to evacuation. It is notable that the CIO and the trade union movement in general is providing much of the impetus toward a realistic approach to the job of easing race tensions.

In case where discrimination involves Constitutional guarantees, the resettled evacuee can appeal to the various civil rights groups, particularly the American Civil Liberties Union, which has already entered cases involving the rights of Americans under the evacuation and curfew orders.

IV

Much of this problem of assimilation is obviously individual. But it is also wider and deeper. I cannot see how Japanese Americans can resolve their situation wholly on an individual plane. For, while their present predicament has some economic and political overtones, basically, as evacuation proved, it is a racial problem, rooted in the racial attitudes of the dominant white majority, particularly on the West Coast. The problem of Japanese Americans being predominantly one of color and race, its ultimate solution will depend on correlation with other problems of color and race in America today.

This fact is slowly seeping into the consciousness of the group. Before evacuation, there was little in the way of a common color consciousness felt by Japanese Americans in their relationships with colored groups. Rather, there was an obvious effort to consider their problem as springing not alone from differences in color, but from economic and political sources. Some even felt and hoped they could win acceptance in the larger white world by the sheer brilliance of their artistic or financial accomplishments; that the grubbiness of life in an Oriental ghetto was reserved for those who would not or could not succeed. It is also true that regional prejudices against Filipinos, Mexicans, Negroes, and Jews were accepted by many Japanese Americans, just as these other victims of discrimination sometimes echo the propaganda of the professional "yellow peril" mongers.

But the racial nature of evacuation developed a recognition among many Japanese Americans that they were inescapably relegated to a place on the color wheel of America, that their problem was basically one of color and is part of the unfinished racial business of democracy. With this realization came a corresponding awareness of the urgent and demanding color problem of the American Negro.

Wartime factors resulted in the location of 16,000 evacuees in Arkansas and 5,000 Japanese American soldiers in Mississippi. Two of the WRA camps, Jerome and Rohwer, were built in southeastern Arkansas, in a race-conscious corner of a race-conscious state. Evacuees entered the South with misgivings, although the majority were unaware of the extent of discrimination against the Negro. With the first Jim-Crow car and the segregated waiting-room at the first station south of the Mason-Dixon line, they learned. When instances of race violence, though minor in nature, were reported against the evacuees, "Jap Crow" became an inevitable corollary of "Jim Crow." The efforts of some citizens of nearby towns to "Jap Crow" the evacuees were stoutly resisted, and Thomas Sancton

observed in The New Republic that this struggle to resist race discrimination was watched closely by Negro groups.

Japanese American soldiers were brought into contact with southern race frictions when the War Department activated the Japanese American combat team at Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The first group to arrive at Shelby consisted of 2,600 volunteers fresh from the color harmony of Hawaii. They hit southern racial attitudes head on, and when they had recovered from the shock, they began writing letters of protest, first to the people at home and later to the President himself. These letters pointed out the inconsistencies of southern treatment of Negroes in the light of our announced war and peace aims. A special representative, Hung Wai Ching, a Chinese American, was sent from Hawaii to investigate. He visited Camp Shelby and then pounded on desks from the Pentagon to the White House, demanding the removal of the Japanese American unit to a camp above the Mason-Dixon line.

The South's traditional bi-racialism, in southern Arkansas and Mississippi at least, has been somewhat shaken by this introduction of large groups of Japanese Americans. In the South they are apparently neither white nor colored. Evacuees entering Jim-Crow cars on the presumption that they, too, are colored, have been ordered out by irate conductors. Yet Japanese American school children in Hattiesburg were segregated in a special class in the white school. And while no cases of discrimination have been reported against Japanese American soldiers on furlough visits to other southern cities, a segregated USO for Nisei troops has now been opened in Hattiesburg. This new USO, though it also admits other soldiers, stands beside the white USO and the Negro USO in the town, a telling reminder of racial attitudes.

Further implementing the coupling of the Japanese American situation with the Negro problem was the claim made by Representative Leroy Johnson of California that a coalition of west-coast and deep-southern congressmen was planning to force legislation for the depotiation of persons of Japanese extraction. This suggestion, which would carry log-rolling to a new extreme, was bulwarked by the fact that such poll-taxers as Senators Stewart and Reynolds and Representatives Rankin, Dies, Allen, and Starnes already have urged legislative restrictions on the Nisei.

Indicative, too, of the identification of their position with the problems of other racial groups, outside resettlement of evacuees hit a temporary snag last summer when the news was red with the blood of race riots. Many a Nisei put himself in the place of Mexican and Negro Americans in the Los Angeles "zoot suit" riot and wondered what would have happened had he been in Los Angeles that June evening.

Thus, fact by fact and incident by incident, Japanese Americans are coming to the realization that theirs is only a part of the nation's race problems. The recent excellent suggestions by

Cary McWilliams and by John Collier and Saul K. Padover in Common Ground for the formulation of a forthright Federal policy on "minorities" and race problems through the passage of a Fair Racial Practices Act and the establishment of an Institute of Ethnic Democracy offer a springboard for co-ordinated action by America's "minorities." Both these proposals need a ground-swell of support from the discriminated-against groups themselves if they are to be brought to the attention of the whole American people. And the basic problem is not that of one group, or of another; it is an American problem. Only the whole American people can solve it. We will all have to learn to reach out beyond our own racial or national or religious insularity to make of America for each other what we want it to be for ourselves.

As a Japanese American, I know our group has far to go along the road to the actual co-ordination of our desire for integration with the mass hopes of all "minorities." But I believe we are coming to the realization that unless America's whole basic racial attitudes are made consistent with Constitutional guarantees, our acceptance as a group will be only superficial. I know that Nisei Americans are not alone---- even in the dimly lighted barracks of relocation camps in the lonely spaces of western deserts. Other Americans, black, yellow, brown, and tan live with them their dreams of ethnic democracy, and other Americans fight with them in their battles for racial justice. I find strenght in the knowledge.

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