

CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR AND THE EVACUATION OF
JAPANESE-AMERICANS FROM HOME AND COMMUNITY;
Nisei Compositions Written Retrospectively
in Diary Form, November, 1942

Introduction to Chapter II

In early November, 1942, students in some of the High School English classes were assigned the task of recording their remembrances of the outbreak of the War, their preparations for evacuation, the actual removal to Assembly Centers, and finally the transfer to the Tule Lake Relocation Center. The young people were directed to write about their own personal experiences in diary form as though they were making notations in their diaries at the time the events were occurring.

The written responses are highly varied in length, form, and content. At least few members of the class, perhaps even many of them, were able to base their written work on actual diary entries which they had recorded in that period of disruption and uncertainty. Some students not only describe events but also present their remembrances of feelings of distress, fear, and excitement. Largely perhaps because of the form in which they were to cast their thoughts, there seems to be in some instances a certain casualness in describing events that had momentous importance in their lives. One has to bear in mind that the assignment came early in the school year, after the close of a recess to allow the youths to help in the Project's potato harvest which had interrupted the school year barely started. Nisei students were generally serious students and much disposed to take assignments seriously as well as to honor the responsibilities they felt they owed the teachers and their own educational advancement. There were, despite the general seriousness of intent, extensive

- 29 -

contrasts in the quality of written and oral expressions. In evaluating their work in terms of what the individual expressions might reveal that is of sociological and psychological significance, one has to bear in mind widespread differences in linguistic skills reflecting a variable patterning of acculturation among this second generation population. There were as well other cultural and personal factors which militated against a full expression of feelings about these serious events in their lives.

The dominant element in the Nisei diary entries in this section is the sadness and despair at leaving friends for what appeared would be a long time and perhaps for ever. Over and over one notes, in various forms of expression, the painful lament of the young evacuee at "leaving all my best friends that were very nice to us even after the war broke open." The numerous references make clear that the Nisei writers were referring not merely to the interruption of the web of social relationships at home that bound them together with other Nisei but also to the *in some instances* hakujin friends, the Caucasian neighbors and school mates. Repeatedly one finds references to the last visit to their school to visit friends and teachers; many were also seen off at the depot by friends and leaders, a fact which was bound to impress them: "Some even wept and told us how much they wanted us to stay." A number of the girls were able to admit, as boys would not, that tears came at the moment of separation: "I tried to hold back my tears but couldn't. I didn't think life could ever do that to me."

In many of the notations, Nisei writers remind themselves or are reminded by others that "we are at war" and that the lives

- 30 -

of millions of people in the country are being dislocated by the call to military services or employment in war industries. Some note that whether the evacuation was right or wrong, the evacuation is the sacrifice required of us." Bitterness and resentment is there too: "why are we being evacuated and not Germans and Italians?" or "All my learnings of Democracy seem shattered. After careful consideration, I realized that it was for my benefit as well as the nation's." How general this kind of resolution to the humiliation of national distrust and to the travail of being uprooted can best be gauged only after a careful reading of all the essays in this volume. One should note at this point, however, what is so widely reflected throughout the whole collection: the widespread Nisei impulse to be constructive; the impulse is at times subordinated to other conclusions and emotions, but it nevertheless remains strong throughout this first year of internment.

In most human crises, even in combat, illness or bereavement, in competitive struggles or civil turbulence, the prevailing emotions of the moment may for a time at least be set aside. Despite the sadness and regret at departure from home and the feelings of uncertainty as to what was to come, there was also the welling up of excitement at new scenes and the anticipation of new experiences one could hardly even guess at.

Many Nisei were able to see during their transfer from home to Assembly Center and from there to the Relocation Center things they had never before experienced.

When I was in Washington we worked on a farm and we were unable to travel. When this mass evacuation came and we rode on train, I was scared to death because I never rode on a train before. I heard much stories

where the train collided, tipped over a bridge into a river or other scary stories. After the train started moving I wasn't scared one bit. I forgot all about my uneasiness because I was interested in the scenery. When on a farm, only things we saw were corn, peas, patches of berries, etc., but on a train it was different. The vast areas of grain glided past, new cities past by - - - oh, it was interesting to look at things change from one to another. I suppose even the Tule Lake W.R.A. is nothing but dust and sand [but] other California cities are beautiful. I could see it in my mind's eye.

I have some studies¹ to do and am quite busy so that I'll close now. . .

Tired as they might be after a long trip to Tule Lake and *difficult and* however uninspiring the community and surrounding terrain might appear, many Nisei noted how anxious they had been "to explore around our new homes." "After eating lunch," a student recalls, "I felt buoyant and full of pep. We clambered about like goats..."

¹ F. Y. to Hanny Billigmeier, June 14, 1943.

Dear Diary,

December 7th, 1941

I have one of the most shocking news to tell you, Diary. Pearl Harbor in Hawaii has been bombed by the Japanese! I can't actually believe it yet. I wonder if it really is true? I guess it must be or Mom's face never would have turned as pale as hers did when she heard the news. It was so strange at lunch this afternoon. We were all eating away when our neighbors came over and exclaimed, "Pearl Harbor has been bombed!" We were abruptly silenced and for a moment no one could speak. Then the tense air was at last broken by a pooh-poohing from Sis.

What are we going to do? What will happen to us? I've never encountered such obstacles as this, but Mom will know. She's sleeping beside me now and I really want to ask her what this is all about now but I know she isn't really sleeping. I know her mind is filled with all kinds of thoughts and on top of that she must bear all of these thoughts all by herself for Pop's isn't here any more. I think I'll wait for few days until her mind is a little easier before I ask anything about this war.

December 8, 1941

Oh, Diary, how I dreaded to go to school today! Mom forced me to go because she said it was better if I go.

The atmosphere of the school was filled with nothing but talks of about Pearl Harbor and those "darn Japs!" I didn't know what to do or say.

Reminiscing

(My reminiscence of June 19, 1942 in diary form)

Friday, June 19, 1942--11:00 p.m.

Today--I can't describe the misery of today. Is this what we call "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?" I didn't know democracy was like this!

It was only a little over twenty-four hours ago when we received a notice stating that we were to pack all of our belongings that we had with us in the Assembly Center and be ready to leave by 9:30 the next evening for Tule Lake. I was eating my supper in the huge mess hall seating 2,000 people, when I first heard this news from my older sister. We were having some kind of roast that evening. But after hearing the news, I dropped my fork and just sat there thinking--I won't be seeing Spanky and Teddy anymore for a while, or will I be seeing Tsug or Joe. But I'll be seeing them soon because we were told that the Assembly Center was going down to Tule Lake, too. Then, I thought that; but now, I know different, because here I am in Tule Lake and they are in Idaho: I sat there at the mess table waiting for the first group of people to get up to leave the mess hall. Finally the people started to leave, so I also got up and hurried my way toward the recreation hall where I waited for my buddies. They wouldn't believe me when I first told them that I was leaving, so I continued on to my room, where my parents and sisters had already started packing and crating our belongings. That night was a nightmare! Many of our friends came over to bid us farewell, while we were running around excitedly and confusedly trying to assemble our clothes. It was a little after 10:00 p.m. before we realized that our adjoining neighbors were

(continued)

trying to sleep. That night! What a miserable night! I lay there on the upset bed trying to sleep, at the same time thinking--of all the families that wanted to go to Tule Lake, it had to be our family who did not want to go, but would rather stay there and be with our friends. That night seemed like days, but finally the breakfast bugle blew. The hall was full of footsteps walking toward the mess hall. I hadn't planned on going for I wasn't hungry, but it was going to be my last breakfast in the center. I went, although I was a little late. After breakfast I came right back to my room and continued to pack my things, but was interrupted often by my friends. I continued packing after lunch until about 3:00. Many of our friends came over about that time. Among them were my buddies, who by then realized that I wasn't joking, and with whom I took my last walk around the Assembly Center. That evening instead of going to supper, as usual, I had my supper at a surprise banquet, which my fellow scouts had planned for me. It wasn't long before it was 9:00 p.m., and I was bidding my last "good-by" to my friends. I didn't realize then, that it was the last time that I would be seeing them in a long time. We were finally asked to get into the cars that were waiting for us outside of the gates. As I walked through the gates, I looked to my right, and there was our scout troop, fully dressed, giving me a formal send-off by their drum and bugle corps. I'll never forget that departure, and I always will be grateful. After about a twenty minute ride, we arrived at the Union Station where we boarded a train. Until now I always enjoyed train trips, but this one wasn't so enjoyable. The train started about 10:20 p.m. and we've been riding steadily ever since toward Tule Lake, to our new home--or would you call a home, "a home", without any friends?

(Male)

My Diary

May 7, 1942. Today is Thursday. I got out of bed about seven, thinking that today would be just another school day. But I was wrong, because we got our notice this morning to evacuate to Walerga Assembly Center tomorrow at nine. I knew we were going to be evacuated soon, but didn't know what day till now. We packed everything that we weren't going to take to camp with us and stored it away in the back room and basement of our house, weeks ago. We also had our house which was to be taken care of by our neighbor at any time. I didn't like the idea of evacuating to camp because of our race and color. "Wht didn't the Germans and Italians have to evacuate too?" I asked myself. I think the main reason was because of their color and race. I couldn't say anything about it, because I was just another guy in the world. I checked out of school 'this morning and said goodbye to all of my friends, knowing that I wouldn't see them for the duration of the war. I went home as soon as possible, then started to pack things the rest of the morning. As soon as I got home, and started to pack things again. We finished packing everything but our bedding by twelve midnight. I went to sleep about one in the morning.

May 8, 1942. Today is the day that we are to go to Walerga Assembly Center. I got up at five in the morning and packed the bedding. I didn't know we could do so much in the twenty-four hours they gave us to get ready. This was a sad day to leave home to go to camp, a place called home. I said goodbye to my neighbor. Then some friends who were coming to camp later took us to the W.C C.A. office, where we are to leave for camp. We all got inspected by a doctor, then started to get on the bus. I didn't like the way they counted us as we got on and off the bus, just

(continued)

like sheep. They made us go in a barrack where they searched us. Then gave us our barrack numbers. I just had a few friends, but I made friends right away. It took all afternoon to get all of our baggage. They inspected every little bit of our baggage, then we had to carry it to our barracks. I went to bed early for I didn't sleep much the night before.

(Male)

My Life in a Relocation Center

November 7, 1942

The order has come! At last we are bound for Tule lake. It was July 11, 1942. I cannot ever forget the preparation that we made to evacuate from the city of Marysville. My memory will always remain with me of that city. This day was the turning point of many a Japanese life. In comparison with the world population, there are very few that had been living in a Relocation Center in America.

But now, while the war rages, we are the victims of circumstances; we are living a new life, that life will be remembered for a long time.

As I vaguely realized, I've never seen so many Japanese in all my life although I am an offspring of one myself. Mass eating in the Mess Halls and living together with other families in the same barracks are new customs to me. During the first few weeks of the project school, (as never before) I realized that a book was so important to a student. I could imagine how much we are benefited by Gutenberg's Printing Press.

Should there not be any war today, there would be no relocation projects, no concentrations camps, no killing nor destruction of our civilization. That storm cloud that has been so long thundering and rearing will be some day pushed away and from across the oceans, over the mountains, everywhere on earth, the beautiful pure white wafting clouds will take its place.

EVACUATION

Dear Diary,

It was on the morning of May 13, 1942 when our time came to depart with our most loved friends. It was the last time we were to see them for how long nobody knows. As much as we hated to leave our best friends behind we had to say "So Long" but not "Good Bye" because in the pit of my stomach there was a feeling that I was going to see them all again.

After boarding the train I kept looking back toward the little town which I never will forget, no matter what happens. By the end of that dreadful day we were informed that it was about a third of the journey. I sat still thinking of what I would be doing if I were back home.

After two days and one night on the train we reached our so-called new home. I first got off the train in a daze and I saw what seemed to be an endless number of barracks. In which one we were going to live, nobody knows. It was about 1:30 a.m., so I was both tired and sleepy. As soon as we got our house, I went to sleep with a thought.

Corrected

Literature

Charles Tsuji

Evacuation

Many weeks before we evacuated, our nearby city people were evacuating. I've seen many buses and freight trucks going toward the Camp Harmony Assembly Center. As we watched them go by, the evacuating people all seemed to be happy as they waved at us with a smile. But as I stood their, it made me feel like I wanted to go with them.

Few days later I went to see some of my friends in the camp. The little children were playing joyfully not knowing what is really happening. The older people were gathered around the fence waiting for their friends to come with a sorrowful look in their face.

Then after I came home from the camp, to my biggest surprise, I saw a notice pasted on the fence & telephone poles. This notice was to notify all Japanese to register for evacuation. From the first day I saw the notice until we evacuated I felt empty down my heart. Leaving all my best friends that were very nice to us even after the war broke open.

When we left our home on May 22nd many of our teachers and friends were their to see all of us off. Soon as we left our home town I forgot all that was going on and were all excited to see what we can from the train. Every one seemed happy as we were on our way to Fresno, California.

After I came into camp I got to know more people from all over the three states. From Pinedale we came to this War Relocation Center on July 16th. On my first glimpse of this camp I wondered how I'll ever get to walk around the camp.

The thought it was a days work to go to Post Office and back. After living in this camp for four month it doesn't seem as far as it did at first.

(continued)

Charles Tsuji

All most all of us have some thing to do to keep us out of many mischief. I think the government is really treating us as best as he can and is doing a swell work.

(Male)

Thursday--May 7

I'll never forget today, for today we received our exclusion orders to evacuate on the 11th, this Monday morning. I just can't believe it. We have been reading in the papers that there was going to be an evacuation. I didn't realize it was going to be so soon. It left me in a melancholy mood.

Friday--May 8

I went to school this morning to drop out and bid good bye to all my classmates. I'll never forget what Bill said to me. He said, "You are helping win this war by leaving your home. Imagine all the young soldier leaving their families and home, not because they want to but because they have to. Remember, you are an American." To say good bye was really hard. I can't express in words how much I hate to leave my friends.

Monday--May 11

Today was a start of new life for me. We arrived 9:30 A.M. into the Assembly Center. Seeing hundreds and hundreds of barracks, I said, "Are they to be our home?" Yes, today it is a reality.

Saturday--June 27

I am bounded for the Tule Lake Relocation Center away up in Northern California. People on our coach are talking of what Tule Lake will be like. Tired--better get some sleep.

Sunday--June 28

Woke up early in the morning in time to see the beautiful snow-clad Mt. Shasta. We have been riding the train at least 12 hours with 500 evacuees. This was the fourth contingent of five leaving the assembly center. Arrived in front of the Relocation Center at 8:15 A.M. Around

(continued)

9 A.M. we were taken to our apartments. The apartments were bare without any inner walls or ceiling. We received iron cots, blankets, and mattresses. I am glad we received iron cots, for the group which arrived yesterday received canvas cots. By the way, I heard we were the first group to receive iron cots. I went without breakfast and ate lunch at 1:30. My first lunch consisted of rice, salad, stew and an apple. First decent food since leaving home.

I am amazed at how large this center is. I heard it is made to accomodate at least 20,000 people.

Seeing thousands and thousands of Japanese in one place makes one feel as though he lives in another country. It makes me feel like saying "When do we go back to our home in America."

Wednesday--July 1

I realized for the first time that etiquette was necessary, for in this colony we eat in groups of from 250-300 people.

I don't know much about etiquette myself.

Saturday--Oct. 31

I went to the Harvest Dance, since I received an invitation to the dance sponsored by the Community Activities. Just a beginner yet. Back home, I never did go to dances; in fact, nobody went in our town.

As each day passes I learn new and more interesting things. Life is gradually becoming easier in our new way of life. P.S. I miss the movies.