

**Liberty**

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# MY ONLY CRIME IS MY FACE

Should the American of Japanese ancestry suffer for Japan's sins? There are two sides to every story. Here is a moving plea by one who is on the other side

BY MARY OYAMA



"It certainly will be strange to have to live with nothing but Japanese! I wonder how we'll stand it?"

This was the comment I heard repeated over and over by American citizens of Japanese descent when the military decree which set us apart from other Americans and expelled us from our Pacific Coast homes went into effect. The evacuation was a bitter blow, but there was nothing we could do except grit our teeth and take it.

It did us no good to argue that we had sons and brothers in the Army, that we were loyal to this land of our birth, that we spoke only English, that we praised the Lord in Christian churches (and were ready

to pass the ammunition, if they'd only let us). Nobody would listen.

Swiftly and effectively the evacuation was accomplished. The streets near the point of departure where we were to take the buses to the first camp—called the Assembly Center—were jammed. Kids stared in pop-eyed fascination at military police on motorcycles and in jeeps. An elderly woman, passing by, stopped to say indignantly, "This is a shame! You are just as much Americans as anybody else!"—an unexpected bit of sympathy from a total stranger that heartened us. Several church groups passed out hot coffee and sandwiches to us, for the morning was early and cool, and in our hurry to be on time many of us had come without break-

fast. Then we got on the buses and said good-by—perhaps forever—to that old free civilian life we had loved so well. Now we were prisoners in custody of the Army.

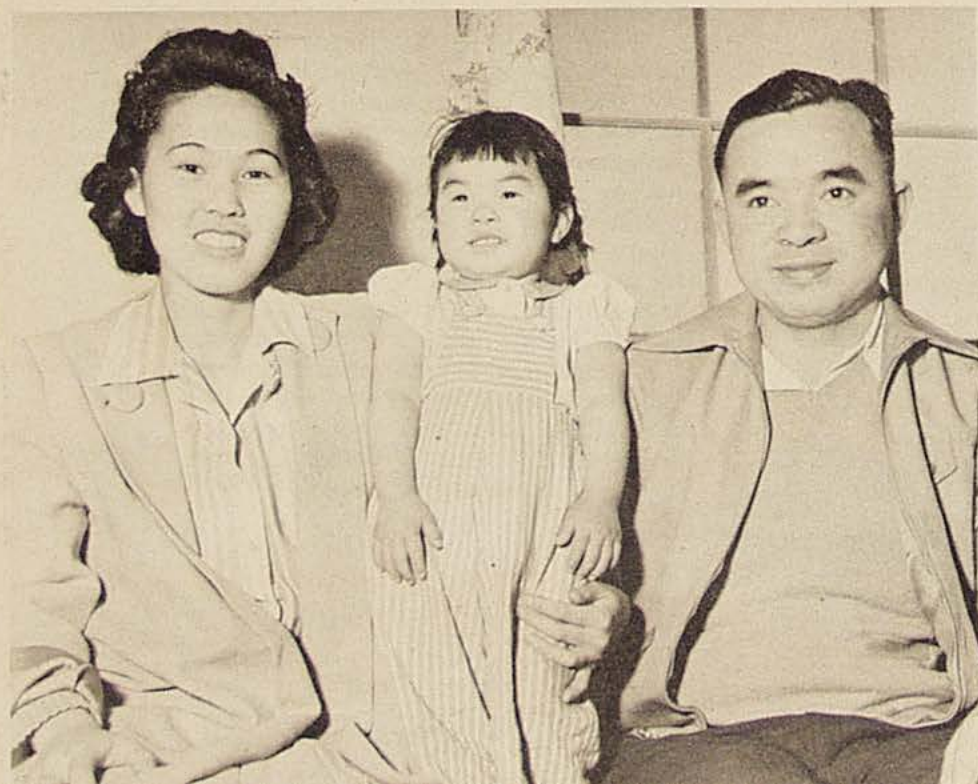
But young people are never down-hearted. In my bus a group of exuberant lads joked and sang to the accompaniment of a ubiquitous ukulele. *Plunk-plunk, plunk-plunk*—"You're the one rose" *plunk-plunk* "that's left" *plunk-plunk* "in" *plunk* "my heart—" A little later, however, when the drone of the bus motor had smoothed down to an even hum, and first enthusiasms had worn off, I heard a softer harmony: "Rock of ages," *plunk-plunk* "cleft for me," *plunk!* "Let me hide [Oh, let me hide.] myself in Thee—"

In front of me a sleepy little child complained to her parents. "Home, mama. Home, daddy—want to go home." But neither daddy nor mama knew what to reply, for where was "home" now?

Arriving at the Assembly Center we found hundreds of our friends who had been evacuated before us. We stared at them glumly until a young fellow got a laugh when he cracked, "Oh, lookit the Japs!"

There were all kinds of people: hard-working farmers and their families; city folk; occasional blondes and even redheads: Caucasian Americans of mixed marriages and their exceptionally beautiful Eurasian children; college students who had picketed the shipping of scrap iron to Japan long before December 7; the young man who threw the Jap-

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Dave and Ruth Natike had an orange ranch in El Monte, California. Now, with daughter Judy, they're at Heart Mountain Relocation Center.



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anese consulate into a dither when he worked for China Relief; pious churchgoing people; and ne'er-dowells. But, whatever we were, we stared in unbelief at the camp's sentry watchtowers and the barbed wire (looking for all the world like the pictures of Nazi concentration camps in Poland).

An elderly Japanese doctor remarked, "I feel sorry enough for us, the Issei [alien Japanese], but at least we have a country. I feel sorer still for you Nisei [American-born citizens of Japanese descent], because it looks as if your own country, the United States, has repudiated you."

That was the worst blow of all. We wondered bitterly if the harsh words he uttered in his meticulous clipped English could be true.

But as we trudged through the gates to our prison—the horse stables of the Santa Anita race track—I decided only to look forward with hope; never to look back at the happy life we were leaving. Today, free again, I am glad I did. Then, however, as my little family was directed to the dark stall which was to be our "home," I couldn't resist one last memory of the real home we had had to leave—the brand-new "dream house" which had sat on top of a hill, a little white six-roomed cottage with sky-blue shutters and gay tinkly door chimes. How happy we had been there with our children, Rickey, aged four, and Eddie, not yet one! But that moment—when we first looked at the dark musty horse stall and had to tell our two little sons that this was "home"—when can it be forgotten?

I am thankful now that Fred, my husband, gave no sign of his own depression but, instead, briskly set about getting the iron army cots, mattresses, and army blankets which were assigned to us.

ON the days following we busied ourselves trying to make the stall more homelike as we unpacked our few belongings, made shelves from salvaged packing crates, laid out straw mats on the asphalt floor, tacked up a few familiar pictures from the home we had just left.

We named our evacuation home Valley Forge and I had an American flag sent in from the outside. Flag after flag was put up in those stalls "so that"—as one young mother expressed it—"the very young children will always know that this is America. Locked in here with alien Japanese, we mustn't ever forget that we are Americans."

At first the crowd noise of 18,500 people jammed in together was so terrific that I thought I could never become accustomed to it. As the partitions between the stalls reached up only a few feet, we could hear every sound made by neighboring families. It was a vast composite roar, an ocean of sound made up of

talking people, crying babies, shouting voices, blaring radios, the tramping and shuffling of feet, and even more unpleasant noises.

But on visiting days, to bolster up our morale, came fellow Americans I shall never forget: college students, former employers, teachers, ministers, Y. workers, laborers, soldiers and sailors.

They laughed, they cried. They brought fruits, cookies, candies, books, magazines. In the thick dust and sticky summer heat, above the dinning babel of voices, old friends jammed up tightly against the wire fence, shocked to see their Nisei friends "caged in." There was the day when some one brought a dog which had formerly belonged to a Nisei couple with a small baby girl. The dog wagged his tail violently upon recognizing his former owners.

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A squad of Russian soldiers caught a Rumanian spy. One of the Russians was ordered to take him to a specified spot outside the little town and shoot him. As the guard and the spy were walking to the ordered destination, the condemned man said, "It is bad enough that you are going to shoot me, but why do you make me walk twenty miles besides?"

"What are you complaining about?" the Russian soldier pointed out. "I've got to walk back."—*Pocketbook of War Humor.*

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The Nisei mother pushed the perambulator closer, right up against the fence. (The M. P. guard looked as if about to say something but didn't; instead, like a good egg, he walked off in the opposite direction.) The child stuck a chubby fist through the fence. The dog licked the little hand affectionately and he kissed the tops of her tiny shoes. Some people took out their handkerchiefs and blew their noses hard. . . .

Our visitors were usually tongue-tied and uneasy, in fact more embarrassed and ill at ease than we. They would stare at us with the saddest expressions in their eyes while their lips would try to murmur polite banalities. But, God bless them, we loved them—they gave us courage in our lowest moments.

Our young people took things more in stride, forgetting their troubles in playing baseball or in jitterbug jam sessions when they were not attending educational classes or working. They played bridge, went out for Red Cross classes, organized Boy Scout troops and Y. M. C. A. and Y. W. C. A. groups, and the musically inclined even formed an orchestra.

When these American boys and girls walked down the camp street romantically holding each other's hands, the alien Japanese older gen-

eration were shocked at this typically Occidental frank display of affection between the sexes—something unheard of in Japan. They were embarrassed at the unembarrassedness of their American offspring. When the pretty Nisei girls walked by in ultra-modern play suits with abbreviated shorts, "bra" tops, and bare midriffs, the oldsters shook their heads. "Hadaka!" they exclaimed. "Nude!"

But the younger generation merely remarked, "This isn't Japan," and chattered among themselves in their jitterbug slang—to them Japs were "Boochies" and Japan was "Boochland."

Once, after a long hot afternoon, I heard an Issei father singing an old Japanese song in a plaintive minor key. Darkness had settled; the after-twilight coolness had brought everybody out of the overwarm quarters. Through the dusk I heard a very young voice protesting, "Oh, gee, pa—not so loud! Everybody can hear you a mile off!" It was twelve-year-old Elsie being adolescently sensitive about her alien father.

So the days passed, summer into autumn, and the time came for us to be moved from the temporary Assembly Center, under Army control, to the Relocation Center, which would be under a civilian administration, farther inland, out of Military Zone No. 1.

THIS time we hopefully crowded into ancient and shabby day coaches, glad to leave the restricted life behind barbed wire, the flickering searchlight flashes at night, the watchtowers of our guards. Our particular group was assigned to Wyoming. The trip, despite overcrowding, was fairly tolerable, although rather trying for mothers with very small children. But we still felt like jailbirds under the surveillance of M. P.s who wore the same uniforms as did our sons and brothers in the Army. I wondered what the youthful sergeants would think if I told them about my blond Nordic "Aryan type" cousin (by marriage) who had enlisted in the U. S. Navy a few days after December 7. . . .

As the train pulled in to a small town that evening and we saw neon lights for the first time since our evacuation months before, we felt almost weepy. How we envied the "free" citizens of that town walking so unconcernedly up and down those brightly lit sidewalks, gazing into store windows, not knowing how lucky they were!

But the crowning bit of irony came on the last night of the trip. After a sweltering, nerve-racking day of desert summer heat and bawling babies, our crowded car stopped momentarily alongside another train headed in the opposite direction. Our day-coach windows evened up alongside of windows which showed the cool, dim-lit, spacious interior of a de luxe dining car. A dozen well dressed people were sitting com-



fortably at table eating what seemed to us a royal feast. The soft glow of shaded lamps was reflected by the white tablecloths. The contrast was so painful that every mother in our car groaned. For the rest of the evening we were glumly homesick.

Arrived at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center, we found the tarpaper-covered barracks more substantial than the Santa Anita stables. We were assigned a family unit, and found therein a good-sized heating stove, army cots, mattresses, blankets, a bucket, and a broom. Just as before, we had to get busy and build our own tables, benches, and shelves out of salvaged lumber. With practiced ingenuity we were now able to make our new home considerably more livable than the horse stall which we had just left.

This was pioneering of a sort: every one helped everybody else in the same spirit of comradeship as did our early American pioneers who pitched in to put up log cabins for neighbors. Rich or poor, we all lived in the same barracks, got up at the same seven-thirty gong, ate at the same rough wooden camp tables, shared the same stall showers and open toilets, tried as best we could to help each other in our regimented communal life.

At first the natives of the neighboring towns of Cody and Powell felt uneasy about this teeming community of "Japs" which the government had forced into their midst. But the sudden boom in business which our presence brought broke the ice, and the good church women of Powell sent a contribution of clothing for our needy. Later our men volunteered for work in the sugar-beet harvest during an acute labor shortage. Ex-professional men, white-collar workers, and students gladly did their best at the back-breaking harvesting. Farmers reported they had never before had such devoted help.

Within a short time the Niseis' quiet demeanor and thorough Americanization of speech, manners, and dress created a favorable impression throughout the countryside. The Powell Tribune, which had first reported in a surprised tone that the new farm helpers "talked good English," later had a Nisei writing a column on Heart Mountain activities.

**W**E finally settled down to taking everything in stride, attending school and night classes, going out for sports, building up a recreational program, and carrying on church work.

Older women gave their services to a USO which was organized in the Center to provide hospitality for visiting Nisei servicemen.

We had twenty-five veterans of the last war at the Center, most of them members of the American Legion. Mr. Hitoshi Fukui, past commander of the Commodore Perry Legion Post No. 525 of Los Angeles, had served in the Ninety-first Division, A. E. F., and saw action at St.

Mihiel, Meuse-Argonne, and Ypres, and was gassed. While he reports that "my life's savings were lost, due to the evacuation," Mr. Fukui still retains a strong faith in American democracy and believes that ultimately the Nisei Americans will be fully vindicated. When another Center Legionnaire, Mr. Clarence Uno, passed away from a heart attack, the Legion posts of Powell and Cody accorded him a full military funeral with color guard, rifle salute, and guard of honor. The body was cremated in Mr. Uno's old American Army uniform.

I gradually got over the pangs of homesickness as new impressions constantly crowded my thoughts. There were, for instance, the young Nisei parents who criticized the English of the Caucasian-American teacher who had asked their child, "Do you play the pianner?" The father had protested, "We don't want our children growing up saying 'pianner' instead of 'piano.'"

And Armistice Day. On that slushy after-snow November 11, mist blurred my eyes as I watched the pa-

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Real happiness don't consist so much in what a man don't have as it duz in what he don't want.—Josh Billings.

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rade of Nisei Boy Scouts (those who could afford it, in uniform) marching behind the flag, splashing through the "streets" of the Center which had turned into almost impassable mud-holes. Our flag behind barbed wires—and these Nisei Americans nevertheless gallantly upholding it! That was the only time I ever permitted myself the luxury of tears.

November was remembered, too, for the double-wedding ceremony of Privates Glenn Oku and Shigeto Toyoshima of the United States Army to the Misses Edna Koga and Kikue Suzuki. The Heart Mountain Sentinel, our mimeographed Center paper, stated that Privates Oku and Toyoshima would return to their outfits. "Both new brides," concluded the laconic announcement, "will remain here when their husbands leave for duty."

As Christmas drew near, the Girl Scouts of Powell came to go a-caroling with the Girl Scouts of the Center. Christmas parties were held in every block for the children. Gifts for them came from all over the United States from churches of every denomination, telling us better than a thousand words that America was still a Christian nation. Of Christmas Eve, Kay Tanouye wrote in the Sentinel:

"The night was cold and sharp. The watchtowers stood out bold in the moonlight. The searchlight sprayed the boundary of the forbidden area, picking out the cruel barbs of the wire fence.

"Six Nisei gathered below the tower and formed a circle. The leader lifted his hands. The words came softly and beautifully in the quiet night: 'Silent night, holy night. All is calm; all is bright.'

"As the last notes drifted away, the Army sentry spoke. His voice caught a little as he said, 'Thank you, fellows. . . . Merry Christmas.'"

With the coming of the New Year of 1943 the évacués faced a brighter outlook, for the government then announced its new policy of gradually releasing those who had a definite assurance of employment. To date, more than 3,000 have been released.

Our little family was released in February. When we passed through Powell, the editor of the Tribune and his wife presented us with candy and toys for the children. Our last memory of Wyoming was pleasant.

**O**N the train my Richard and his brother played with some tow-headed, blue-eyed children who were in our coach. (I couldn't help but reflect that the only true democracy there is is the democracy of childhood—before a child's mind is contaminated by the prejudices of adults.) A kindly soldier offered his coat "in case they're cold," when the children napped. I can still see his friendly face.

We were sent to Denver, where my husband had work. I can tell you it's great to be free after months of confinement in a regimented, communal existence. We are living in poorer circumstances compared to our pre-evacuation status, but we are not unhappy. I'll never, never take freedom for granted again.

I used to tell myself in the camp that my only crime was my face. But now, when I look in the mirror, I remember what a friend once said: "When I first met you, Mary, I just couldn't get over the novelty of your Japanese face. Strange that an American like you should look like that. First it was ninety per cent strangeness and novelty and maybe ten per cent friendly interest. About the second time I saw you, it was fifty per cent novelty and fifty per cent friendliness. Now I begin to notice less what you *look* like and to know more what you *really are*. Pretty soon I'll forget what you look like altogether. I'll know you only as another fellow American."

I hope every one will be like that. Although we still feel that the basis on which we were evacuated (because of racial extraction) was unjust, and although we believe our incarceration was illegal (because of our American Bill of Rights!), we have decided that the fullest cooperation with the government is the very best way to prove our loyalty to our country.

More of us who have been released, and those of us still held in the camps, can say this has been our contribution to the war effort.

THE END