

With Liberty and Justice for Some

Miyo Lynne Someya

Writer's comment: When Jane, my English 1 instructor, assigned us our I-search paper, she suggested that we take advantage of the assignment and choose a topic that we had always wanted to learn more about but had not yet had the time or the initiative to do so. Despite being "unknowledgeable" in many things, I could not think of a topic that captured my interest. It was not until the day before the topic was due that I thought of my grandmother, and her life. Though I knew the basics of my grandmother's life, I had never scraped the surface to get to know her experiences. One era in her life, the relocation during World War II, had particularly interested me for years, but I never had the words, or perhaps the "reason" that I had thought I needed, to ask about it. In the first minutes of the interview, I found I was more nervous than my grandmother, who was always open and honest. After the interview, I couldn't wait to do the research (oddly enough) because I was so intent on finding how the evacuation of a specific ethnicity could not be called racism. I found a lot of disturbing information, but more importantly, I found a stronger sense of appreciation for my culture.

Because they helped to make this paper possible, I would like to thank Jane Hotchkiss for her encouragement and advice, the very helpful library aides, and last but not least, my grandma (ba-chan) for her honesty, patience, and courage.

—Miyo Lynne Someya

Instructor's comment: One of Miyo's concerns as this essay evolved was how to incorporate her grandmother's memories within the structure of a research paper on the history of Japanese American internment during World War II. She met this challenge beautifully, as the opening paragraph shows; her grandmother's experience functions as a touchstone to which the essay returns repeatedly, bringing the history alive. In this essay Miyo combines her considerable talent for descriptive writing with her organizational and reporting skills; the essay is moving as well as informative. I'm happy that others will get to share this reading experience.

—Jane Hotchkiss, English Department

Standing there in the dark entrance, holding one worn luggage bag in one hand and one child's hand in the other, she inspected every detail, no matter how discrete. Blind to nothing, she wished she could see no more. The damp small room reeked of horse manure, and its floors were saturated with a mixture of soggy wood shavings, some leftover manure and rotting hay, and a slight whisper of bleach. Holes and hoof marks spotted the wooden boards dividing the stalls, allowing no privacy. Two strips of a hazy yellowness coming from two cracked windows were the only source of light.

A cool breeze rushed in from behind her, causing the trash to dance around her feet and the dust to blur her vision. "I just kept telling myself that there must be some mistake—even if I didn't believe myself, I had to say something—anything—to calm my panic" (Someya).

The renovated horse stables in San Bruno, California, known as Tanforan, served as one temporary "rest stop" for 8,000 Japanese Americans in that area awaiting the completion of the concentration camps (Uchida 69). The decision for the evacuation of all western Japanese Americans was the result of Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. By the end of that day, 737 Japanese Americans were taken in federal custody, for fear that the "'enemy aliens' were 'dangerous'" (Daniels *et al.* xv). Though "enemy aliens" included the Italians and Germans, the government arrested only the Japanese Americans. The government justified its actions as a protective measure, but only the Japanese were denied their civil service jobs and later, were imprisoned in relocation camps (Daniels *et al.* xv).

Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, rumors spread that the Japanese Americans in Hawaii had guided Japan. These rumors spread throughout the country quickly enough that FBI agents derived a list of suspects that day (Friedrich). Despite the Constitutional right of protection against arbitrary arrest—but because of the United States law of 1924, which forbade Japanese immigration—Japanese Americans were "classified as 'enemy aliens'" (Friedrich).

Barely two months after the bombing, on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed, despite its violations against half of the Bill of Rights, the Executive Order 9066, which "permitted the secretary of war to establish military areas 'from which any or all persons may be excluded as deemed necessary or desirable'" (Daniels *et al.* xv). The urge for complete evacuation did not gain momentum until a publication of government papers claimed that Pearl Harbor happened because "U.S. military men (were negligent) in controlling enemy agents. . . . Between February 9 and February 22, 505 messages reached the Attorney General urging evacuation, while only 64 writers opposed it" (Girdner and Loftis 100). By observing the sudden increase in complaints following the question of negligence, Girdner and Loftis conclude, "longtime opponents" of the Japanese organized the pro-evacuation requests: "[T]he public demand for evacuation arose and reached its crescendo in two weeks" (100). Previous to Executive Order 9066, 3,000 Japanese Americans were arrested and sent to Missoula, Montana, and Lordsburg, New Mexico, where "each man received a hearing. . . . Some were freed as a result of those hearings," but most males and, for no apparent reason, women and children were not released (Daniels 72).

The approval of Executive Order 9066 confirmed the ignorant racists' belief that the Japanese were "evil." In a report of the Japanese evacuation from the West Coast, the Office of the Commanding General stated that "the evacuation was impelled by military necessity" and that "the continued presence of large numbers of persons of an unassimilated, tightly knit racial group, bound to an enemy nation by strong ties of race, culture, customs and religion . . . could not have been countenanced" because of their "rapacious temper" (*Final Report* iii). Supreme Court Justice Frank Murphy, who

opposed the internment, wrote that the relocation was "utterly revolting among a free people who have embraced the principles set forth in the Constitution of the United States. [All Americans] are kin . . . to a foreign land. Yet they are . . . a part of the new and distinct civilization of the United States" (qtd. in Kato). Racism had now become legalized.

Like most Japanese Americans, my grandmother was given ten days to sell her possessions and travel to her assigned destination. With a mixture of emotions in her voice, she recalled the past, "We had everything—finally. And now it was all gone. But you had to do what you were told. We were given ten days to sell it all. They told us to just get rid of everything" (Someya). Within a matter of ten days, a lifetime's worth of the "American" dream was sold. Those who refused to sell their possessions, in hopes of returning home to find them, were disappointed to find that vandals and thieves had destroyed or stolen them. Despite the few cases in which faithful friends held some property and possessions, most items became memories. The Federal Reserve Bank has estimated that the 120,313 evacuated Japanese Americans lost "roughly \$400 million" (Girdner and Loftis 308; Uchida 150).

Entering the concentration camps with only the belongings they could carry, these political prisoners were surprised to see such desolate land. "It was almost like a big hand from the sky picked us out of our little world and placed us in a black-and-white TV. It was very different—dry and windy. My eyes hurt from the sun and the sand" (Someya). The most shocking part of the concentration camp was the watchtowers. One woman wrote to a friend, "This evacuation did not seem too unfair until we got right to the camp and were met by soldiers with guns and bayonets. Then I almost started screaming" (qtd. in Girdner and Loftis 147).

Though the concentration camps were not physically abusive, they were still dehumanizing. Used to a four-bedroom house with a beautiful view of the San Francisco Bay, my grandmother now had to live in a barrack the size of her living room and share it with her family of four, her parents-in-law, and her husband's brother and wife. "I continually spent time dusting the barrack. It was so filthy, and I didn't want the boys to get sick with all the dirt. Besides, I had nothing else to do; the women just sat around and talked while the children went to school" (Someya). Fortunately, the government provided some last-minute educators and make-shift school rooms. The education provided by each concentration camp was "to meet the standards of the states in which they were located" (Sekerak 40). "Our sequential theme for the entire school system was to be 'Adaptation of Our Socioeconomic Arrangements to the Control and Direction of Technological Development'" (Sekerak 40). For example, one teacher, Ms. Sekerak, would ask her first graders, "'How can the yard at school be made more useful and beautiful?' In reality, the yard was dust (or mud) with huge piles of coal, and not a leaf could be coaxed from that alkali soil" (40).

Though their inherent right to reserve certain freedoms was nonexistent, the Japanese American citizens in camp were, ironically, given special rights, such as holding a job. Because the United States feared that their "internees" would be called war prisoners, Japanese Americans were offered a monthly wage, amounting to a

meager \$14 to \$20 a month (Girdner and Loftis 179), \$67 below the median wage in 1942–1943 (U.S. Bureau of the Census). Such jobs as farming, assembly line work, and mechanics occupied the workers.

Most internees tried to adapt to the abrupt change of lifestyle, but there were a few difficulties that could not be overcome. "The most tiring part of it all was the constant lines. We had lines to go to the bathroom, to bathe, to eat—almost anything you could think of" (Someya). The mess hall they shared had the longest line, and often times, family members could not eat all together. Such drastic social and familial changes were difficult to confront because basic traditions could not be kept. Thus, the most devastating and lasting effect of the concentration camp was the severe generation gap it introduced within families.

The government started releasing evacuees in 1945, during the months of January through October, with the last evacuees released on March 20, 1946 (Daniels *et al.* xxi). Adjustment back into the "outside world" was difficult for many Japanese because many people had believed they were the "enemy." Blatant racism flashed around unsuspecting victims, while doubt crept into the evacuees' minds. "After we moved back to the city [San Francisco], I went shopping on Fillmore Street with [my son] and a *hakujin* [Caucasian] lady rushed out onto the sidewalk and stood there, pointing at us, yelling, 'Goddamn you Japs! Go back where you came from! You're all trying to take over!' I was so surprised, I pretended I didn't understand and walked quickly away" (Someya).

Now fifty years later, Japanese Americans have shared their stories. After they were released, discussing concentration camp and its experience became taboo. Because their culture revolves around respect for privacy and a strong distaste for aggression, the Japanese could not talk about their experiences. A typical saying that epitomizes the Japanese attitude is *shikataganai*, which means "let it be," or "oh, well." They first started confronting their experience during the 1960s, when the Japanese American youth began to question their grandparents' and parents' evacuation. "[The children] were right to ask these questions, for they made us search for some obscured truths. They are the generation for whom civil rights meant more than just words. They taught us to celebrate our ethnicity and discover our ethnic pride" (Uchida 147).

After much persistence and arguing, the Japanese Americans were given the "very limited Japanese American Claims Act of 1948" (Daniels 188), which compensated approximately 23,000 claimants with an average payment of \$440 for their losses (Uchida 150). In the late 1960s the movement for redress strengthened, and on August 10, 1988, President Reagan signed a bill, SB1009, that included a formal apology for the Japanese American internment and a payment of \$20,000 to each of the 75,000 survivors (Mathews). The presidential letter stated, "Words alone cannot restore lost years or erase painful memories" (qtd. in Friedrich 69). But for most Japanese Americans, their satisfaction stemmed from only the apology, which acknowledged the fact that the government had made a terrible mistake. "The money doesn't mean anything to me. It can't buy back all that I had lost back then and it certainly can't give me back those years,

when I was so young. But I accepted it so I can give my grandchildren things that I was deprived of" (Someya).

The Japanese American internment is described "as perhaps one of the greatest deprivations in civil rights in American history—a civil rights disaster, as one noted legal commentator described it" (Minami). Unfortunately, in the frenzy of war, the media became the judge and public opinion became the jury. The news stated mere rumors of espionage, which have never been proved to this day (Minami). True, the Japanese American internment was a tragedy, but the real tragedy lies within the people who did not fight against this flagrant abuse of justice. Only three Japanese Americans fought Executive Order 9066, and though they lost their court battles, they managed to plant a seed of doubt in others' minds. The Japanese Americans had a voice of 120,000 people strong, yet it was hardly louder than a whisper. More vocal Japanese Americans have now since shared their stories because they wish to turn their experiences into lessons learned, so that it will never happen again. "Hopefully, our tragedy can save another people from heartache, as we have experienced" (Someya).

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