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After Camp

More than forty years have passed since Americans and resident aliens of Japanese ancestry were removed from their homes on the West Coast to the barbed-wire camps of the interior. Forty years fade memories and transform stereotypes. Today, Japanese Americans are not often viewed as unassimilable aliens; since the racial turmoil of the 1960's, indeed, they have been portrayed as the "model minority," a group with high educational and professional achievements, model citizens free of most social pathology who do not agitate or disturb the status quo.¹ Has this once-vilified ethnic group managed to escape at last the effects of its wartime incarceration?

Certainly, Japanese Americans have displayed impressive resilience and fortitude in the face of unique adversity. Entrance and acceptance into the mainstream of American society through the conventional modes of success have been largely accomplished. But success is far from the whole story. Scars, even wounds from exclusion and detention still remain. Relative economic affluence has been gained, but not without high psychic price.

After the release from camp, the Issei and Nisei attempted to rebuild their disrupted lives, more often than not from scratch. Some Issei, then in their late fifties or sixties, never regained lost momentum and stayed impoverished, dependent on their children, for the rest of their lives. Postwar inflation and the labor shortage helped them take up occupations once again. Earnings that approached or exceeded

prewar wages provided a morale-boosting sense of accomplishment for the ethnic Japanese—even though their earnings now purchased far less—and the demand for services provided more job opportunities than before the war. The acute postwar housing shortage, however, sometimes forced ethnic Japanese to live in remote areas far from desirable job markets.

Of course, some—the farmers and proprietors—who had most before the war, also lost most. With their financial reserves gone or depleted by the time they were released, many had little or no capital with which to reestablish independent enterprise, particularly with the postwar rise in prices. Most were forced to accept whatever jobs they could find, often menial; others went into businesses that required little start-up capital, such as contract gardening.

It has been argued that evacuation allowed Nisei students to lift their sights beyond the parochial limits of the West Coast and go to eastern and midwestern colleges which opened new doors to advancement for them.² Some have contended that evacuation also removed Japanese Americans from low-paying agricultural work, setting them on the road to economic betterment in white collar and professional occupations.³ But the prewar record of the Nisei indicates that, in a society free of discrimination, Japanese Americans were likely to have advanced rapidly in economic and material terms. The evacuation cannot be characterized as a necessary spur to success.

Both arguments suggest, however, that Japanese Americans should not complain now about setbacks caused by their wartime exile, since they have done very well economically since the war. But a closer look reveals that this “fact” masks other circumstances that make the economic position of Japanese Americans less glittering than it appears.*

*A study sponsored by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights discovered that in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and Chicago, the income of ethnic Japanese males with four or more years of college averaged only 83% and Japanese females 53% of that of white males with comparable education residing in the same area. Japanese males who had completed high school to three years of college earned about 83% of the income of white males, and those with less than a high school education earned about 84% that of white males. In Honolulu, however, Japanese males and females with high school and college educations surpassed their white counterparts. Citing a study by Harold H. Wong, the report added that the earnings differential between Japanese and white males in California could not be explained by taking into account such factors as education, labor market experience, United States citizenship, number of years in the United States, vocational training, disa-

More significant than economic loss was the destruction that knew no boundaries between rich and poor—damage to the lives of Issei, Nisei, and even Sansei. In city after city, the Commission heard testimony from former evacuees who for the first time openly expressed pain and anger about evacuation and its aftermath. Many had never articulated their feelings even to their children, or within the ethnic community which shared their experience. It became obvious that a forty-year silence did not mean that bitter memories had dissipated; they had only been buried in a shallow grave.

For Japanese Americans, camp is a point of reference. As one Sansei/Yonsei put it:

I can go anywhere in the United States today and . . . talk to a Nisei or Japanese American family and after the initial social amenities are taken care of . . . discussions . . . without a doubt . . . will get to the topic of camp. . . . People will ask, "Were you in camp?" And of course I wasn't. And that doesn't end the questions because then they ask, "Were your parents in camp?" And if you tell them what camp your parents were in, and if they were not themselves in that camp, then they would ask if you knew so-and-so who was in that camp.⁴

Despite its painful significance, Japanese American discussions about camp, when they occurred at all, for a long time recounted only the trivial or humorous moments. The Sansei sometimes found this troubling:

When I first learned of the internment as a youth, I found that it was a difficult matter to discuss with my parents. My perception of them was that they did not speak honestly about the camp experience. Positive aspects were mentioned, if anything at all, but there always seemed to be something that was left out. My feeling was that there was much more to their experience than they wanted to reveal. Their words said one thing, while their hearts were holding something else deep inside.⁵

Dr. Tetsuden Kashima of the University of Washington calls this behavior "social amnesia . . . a group phenomenon in which attempts are made to suppress feelings and memories of particular moments or

bility, or labor market area. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Success of Asian Americans: Fact or Fiction?* (Clearinghouse Publication 64, September 1980); Amado Y. Cabezas, "Disadvantaged Employment Status of Asian and Pacific Americans," in *Civil Rights Issues of Asian and Pacific Americans: Myths and Realities* (Paper presented at consultation sponsored by U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1979), pp. 440–41.

extended time periods . . . a conscious effort . . . to cover up less than pleasant memories.”⁶

Why should these people experience such psychological trauma? They knew they were innocent and, in the opinion of the WRA, the camps had been administered humanely. Dr. Philip Zimbardo, psychology professor at Stanford University, offers insight from his 1971 experiment designed to reveal the psychology of imprisonment:

[W]e populated a mock prison with a group of normal, healthy, young men who had a history of being law-abiding citizens. . . . By a flip of the coin, these college student volunteers were randomly assigned to be inmates or jailers for the projected two-week period of the study. Thus, it was a totally arbitrary decision that determined the fate of the citizen who had done no wrong, but was to be labelled a prisoner and then treated as if he had violated the law of the land.

This Stanford prison experiment had to be terminated in less than one week because it ceased being just a simulation and had taken on all the worst aspects of a real prison. . . . The prisoners were constantly reminded of their loss of freedom and their powerless condition. . . . The sense of helplessness that was evident among the prisoners was reflected not only in their low self-esteem; some of them broke out in psychosomatic rashes . . . and evidenced genuinely disturbed mental functioning. Even though these mock prisoners knew that they had done nothing to deserve the kind of treatment they received, nevertheless, they reported feeling shamed by the surrender of their autonomy to the guards and humbled by a sense of being outcasts, misfits, and transgressors.⁷

The assembly and relocation centers were not prisons in the same sense as Leavenworth or even the minimum-security institutions where Watergate defendants served time. Nonetheless, all had armed guards in sentry towers, and evacuees were not at liberty to come and go as they pleased. As Dr. Zimbardo told the Commission, “My research forces me to conclude ‘prison’ is any situation wherein one person or group’s freedom and liberty are denied by virtue of the arbitrary power of another person or group.”⁸

According to Christie W. Kiefer in *Changing Cultures, Changing Lives*, “[P]ersons who have been tormented for some supposed error or deficiency often end up agreeing with the definition of themselves offered by their tormentors and trying to atone for their error.”⁹ After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, many Issei thought that they, as aliens, might be interned for the duration of the war; but they felt less certain about their children, who, of course, were American citizens by birth.

The Issei, Kiefer found, “felt that they had been deficient in feeling and expressing loyalty to their host country” and are “not inclined to judge the relocation as unfair even when they recall the suffering and loss it brought them.”¹⁰ Kiefer added that many Issei had chosen to emigrate, sometimes against the warnings of kin, and had elected to remain in this country after others had left in disgust. They were reluctant to admit that their gamble was a serious mistake. Consequently, “[a]s long as they could see the evacuation as a natural disaster like the typhoons and earthquakes of their homeland, impersonal and therefore blameless, accidental and therefore unavoidable, they would not have to feel the guilt of self-betrayal.”¹¹

The Nisei’s social and psychological response to the wartime experience differed significantly from the Issei’s, largely because the Nisei, while acknowledging their ancestral cultural roots, saw themselves first as Americans with rights under the Constitution despite prewar discrimination. Yet their government put them behind barbed wire because of distrust based on their ethnicity. They learned that Constitutional rights were not an individual and personal guarantee if one were an American of Japanese ancestry.

The Nisei adjusted to this assault on their expectations and identity as Americans in a variety of modes which are not mutually exclusive and can change over time. Among the most common are:

- Attempting to deny or avoid the experience and refusing to acknowledge the significance of losses. “Let’s forget about it; it is all behind us.”¹²
- Losing faith in white America; maintaining a general distrust or hatred toward white society and choosing to associate only with Japanese Americans.¹³
- Turning aggressions inward, as rape victims often do, by blaming themselves for something over which they had little control.¹⁴ Anger is internalized as feelings of guilt, shame, and racial inferiority; and energy is focused on attaining economic success in order to prove that one is not inferior:

Society has stripped a whole group of people of confidence. We are afraid to speak out. We will try to keep peace at any price. We will not make waves. It makes us uncomfortable to stand out. We want to blend in. We want to be middle America.¹⁵

- Identifying with the aggressor by refusing to associate with other Japanese Americans and proudly proclaiming ignorance of Japan, its language and culture.¹⁶ This attitude was encouraged by government resettlement policies which stressed assimilation—the WRA admon-

ished former evacuees not to congregate in public, that "no more than three Nisei should walk along the street together and that no more than five should be together in a restaurant," and that it would be wise to avoid living next door to another Japanese American family.¹⁷ Not unusual was the testimony that "when I would see a Japanese American approaching me on the street, I would turn and walk away or dash into a nearby store."¹⁸ This denial of who one was and how one looked bred ethnic hate and, ultimately, self-loathing.

Evacuation dealt a major blow to the family as a social institution. In the camps, Issei lost their roles as family heads and breadwinners. In the messhalls the evening meal, when values and manners were traditionally taught, was no longer a family affair, and lack of privacy even in living quarters made it difficult to discipline children. As a result of WRA policies, Issei, particularly those who could not speak English, could no longer be community leaders. Coming from a culture that values age and respects elders, they found themselves forced prematurely to relinquish their power and status to the younger generation. Even after the war, in many families, a Nisei, not his or her parent, acted as the head.

The scars of wartime incarceration are not borne by the Issei and Nisei alone. It shaped the way in which the Sansei were raised:

[M]y father [a Nisei] always told us, "Get a good education, for it is something no one could take away from you". . . . He said we should assimilate, for any cultural deviation from the mainstream would only hold us back.¹⁹

The Nisei told their children, "Don't make waves. Don't stand out. You are different enough anyway." Some would not pass on to their children what they knew about Japanese culture. Some chose not to tell their children of Japanese Americans' wartime suffering, because they felt that ignorance would prevent bitterness and make them better Americans.

The impact of the government's evacuation and resettlement policies went beyond radically altering individual lives; it hastened change in the ethnic communities. The problems of small proprietors in re-establishing themselves were felt widely, since many of their businesses had been located in Japanese districts and depended on ethnic Japanese clientele. Some Japanese proprietors were eventually successful in displacing businesses that had moved in during their absence, but the Japanese districts never quite regained their prewar vitality. The returning Japanese were no longer as geographically concentrated, and the Nisei and Sansei ceased to patronize ethnic stores, preferring to

buy from chain stores or other places that offered the best bargains, continuing a process that had begun before World War II.²⁰

After the war, ethnic Japanese communities were split by more than geography. The residue of decisions and experiences surrounding the "loyalty" questionnaire is so bitter that, four decades later, an evacuee testified, "[E]ven to this day, there are many amongst us who do not speak about that period for fear that the same harsh feelings might arise up again to the surface."²¹ And although it has been many years since they saw prominent community members arrested and interned by the FBI, many remain fearful of taking leadership positions in the ethnic community.²² The wartime wounds have not entirely healed.

"Before evacuation." "After camp." Words signifying the watershed in the history of Japanese Americans in the United States. Even after four decades, it is the mournful reference point from which these Americans describe changes in their communities, their personal lives, their aspirations. It is the central experience which has shaped the way they see themselves, how they see America, and how they have raised their children.