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MARGARET HIRATSUKA'S EXPERIENCE IN JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMP

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 drew the United States into World War II and spawned a massive wave of shock and fear across the country. It also prompted the U.S. government to round up and send more than 117,000 Japanese-Americans to internment camps.

Margaret Morita Hiratsuka was 13 years old on December 7th, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked about 11:30 A.M. By 6:30 that evening, two F.B.I. agents entered her parent's store in Seattle, Washington, handcuffed her father immediately, made her mother sit at a table in the middle of the next room, and told them not to speak to each other. While one agent stood guard over her father, the other agent thoroughly searched their five-room apartment, taking two long hours to do so. The F.B.I. agents were looking for lists of names, maps, scrolls written in Japanese, documents, etc. They carefully sorted out documents with her father's name on them and took these, including the birth certificates of her parent's 6 children. Her oldest brother, Roy, at 21 needed the proof of citizenship to carry on some business transactions necessary for the family's existence.

Her father was taken away and she did not see him again for 3 ½ years. He was held incommunicado. Roy went down to the F.B.I. office every day for weeks asking to see him. It was not until the day before her father was sent to Fort Missoula Internment Camp, Montana that her mother was finally allowed to talk to him for just a short time. They had to talk in English, and during the conversation, her father mentioned to her mother that she should look after the green stamps, which were food stamps that people on relief used. The guard listening to their conversation thought maybe they were talking about blue-prints. The next day, her mom received a call from the F.B.I. telling her to stay home so they could come and question her at length until they were satisfied that they had only talked about relief stamps. Her mom had been under such strain and anxiety that the next day her legs refused to support her. She had had visions of being interned by the F.B.I., leaving six children behind from the ages of ten to twenty-one.

Her father's crime was that he was an enemy alien, even though he had lived in America for 25 years, but had been denied citizenship. He came to the U.S. in 1916 on a student visa. Because her father had served in the Japanese army as a conscript before coming to the US, belonged to some Japanese

organizations, taught Kendo, and in the course of earning a living to support his wife and children had come into contact with Japanese visitors while working at his father-in-law's hotel, he was subjected to intensive interrogation day after day.

Her father was in his prime, a healthy, vigorous man, who was quite athletic, at the time of his internment. When he was finally released, but only to the Rocky Mountain area, in 1945, he was a haunted, persecuted man, who soon suffered a paralyzing stroke and spent the remaining fifteen years of his life an invalid.

On January 22, 1942, Congressman Leland Ford of California launched the campaign "to move all Japanese, native born and alien, to concentration camps." It was quickly taken up, and pressures against the Japanese increased. Hearst columnist, Henry McLemore, wrote on January 29, 1942:

Why treat the Japs well here? They take the parking positions. They get ahead of you in the stamp line at the post office. They have their share of seats on the bus and streetcar lines...I am for immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior. I don't mean a nice part of the interior either. Let 'em be pinched, hurt, hungry, and dead up against it. Personally, I hate the Japanese. And that goes for all of them.

On March 27, 1942, the curfew order became effective, requiring all persons of Japanese ancestry in Military Area No. 1, (western CA, OR, WA) to be in their places of residence between the hours of 8 P.M. and 6 A.M.; forbidding possession of firearms, explosives, cameras, radio transmitting sets or short-wave receiving sets; and barring travel more than 5 miles from home without permits.

On March 24th, the Civilian Exclusion Order went into effect, beginning the forced evacuation of the Japanese from their homes to "Assembly Centers", actually makeshift concentration camps providing temporary housing for about 92,000 people of Japanese ancestry. Those incarcerated in "assembly centers" spent an average of 3 months there before being transferred to a permanent concentration camp.

Before Margaret and her family were ready to enter the Assembly Center, it was necessary for them to dispose of their business, their furniture, and all other possessions that they could not carry with them. Margaret writes: "Since everyone knew that we had to dispose of our property, they took advantage of this fact and most of us fared very poorly." "The material possessions were not too hard for us children to part with, and certain other

valuables were stored by friends or in The Japanese Baptist Church where the family worshiped (Margaret's mother converted to Christianity after she came to the U.S. in 1918), but our greatest heartbreak was to leave our dog "Mickey" behind." "The utter insecurity of our position, bewilderment, frequent lack of money to buy food, all conspired to make us the victims of bargain hunters."

Destitution among Japanese families increased with frequent F.B.I. raids and removal of alien family heads. With the announcement of clearance of prohibited zones, from which the Japanese were to be moved, second-hand dealers and thrifty housewives began to work on the terrified segment of the population to sell anything of value for far less than it was worth. *Those imprisoned ended up losing **between \$2 billion and \$5 billion** worth of property in 2017 dollars during the war, according to the Commission on the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians.*

Bradford Smith, chief of the Central Pacific Division of the Office of War Information during the war, who made a critical study of the evacuation, asserts that the forced disposal of the property owned or controlled by persons of Japanese ancestry following the issuance of the exclusion was one of the greatest swindles in American history.

The evacuees from the city of Seattle were taken to an Assembly Center at the Puyallup Fairgrounds in the southeastern part of WA, 36 miles from Seattle. Each family was given a number which was placed on their luggage and even on small children.

Margaret's family was assigned to a small room with a pot-bellied stove with a front door and a small window in the back. The partitions between the units didn't go all the way up the roof so any sounds made would carry throughout the entire barrack. They were given bags of ticking and told to go where there were piles of hay and to help themselves to the straw, filling up their bags with as much as they wanted, then sewing them roughly together, and carrying them back to their rooms to sleep on. Margaret's 7 family members squeezed together in their one room "apartment."

For the younger children, like herself, this experience of being moved to the fairgrounds, getting out of school in March instead of June, filling bags of ticking, eating in a common mess hall, washing in a common bath facility, going outdoors to the bathroom, was like an adventure. Since they had no responsibilities and had their entire family with them, except for their father, they were out to make the most of it. However, they soon were to find how terribly confined they were, for a few feet from the end of their barrack were barbed-wire fences, and at the four corners of the camp were guard towers with guards with machine guns and search lights looking down on them.

Every night, they took a physical count of each of them to make sure they were still all there. For her mother, this was the first time in many years when she could relax and not have to cook, and since they only had one small room, not much housekeeping either.

As the summer wore on and the time came closer to the family being transferred to a Relocation Center, many rumors were circulated around camp. Their group was to go to Minidoka, Idaho (656 miles from Seattle), in the middle of miles and miles of sagebrush, acres of sand, howling coyotes, ticks, and rattlesnakes.

Ten barrack cities were widely scattered across the continent between the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the lower Mississippi River. The Minidoka relocation center housed up to 10,000 people. The transfer from Puyallup Fairgrounds to Minidoka was accomplished via train in very old coaches that Margaret's mother thought might have dated back to President Lincoln's time.

They arrived in Minidoka before some of the basic needs were ready. Their 20 feet by 24 feet one room barrack apartment was ready, and the mess hall was ready, but their wash rooms and rest rooms were not ready. Some 160 of the females in their block had to use one out-house with two chemically treated toilets for many months. As the days went on, they could hardly stomach the stench. And on top of that, there were several epidemics of dysentery. It was with real joy that they received the news that their indoor flush toilets and showers were ready.

Their barrack apartment this time was somewhat larger than that in the Assembly Center. They were able to squeeze 7 Army cots down at one end of the room and still have room for a table in the middle, with the pot-bellied stove at the other end, along with a small closet. She remembers that there was barely enough room to walk around. Margaret could not understand why it was necessary to intern her father separately from the rest of the family. As long as they were under guard, with barbed-wire fences, not having the freedom to come and go as they pleased, why separate a father from his wife and young adolescent children who needed his guidance? Their tight-knit family collapsed as they all tended to go their own way. They were no longer dependent on their parents for food, clothing or shelter.

Margaret writes that they were happy that their school in Minidoka Relocation Center was not ready for them that September and did not open until November 16th. There were 1,319 students in the new Hunt High School. In bare, unfurnished barracks, they sat at "seat-attached" dining tables, and tried to study with the meager supply of books on hand. Margaret and her siblings made new friends. Weather permitting, they played basketball and

went ice skating along the irrigation canal (a bit dangerous). They eventually built a swimming pool. With November, came the cold, the rain and the first snow. They struggled through the deep, treacherous mud to get to school. If they did not walk very carefully, tugging at each boot as they took a step, they walked right out of their boots leaving them in the mud. This was soon followed by a January 20 degrees below zero freeze. They had but one pot-bellied stove in their apartment and in their classroom to keep them warm.

However inadequate their schools might have been, they were grateful to the teachers (not many of them certified) who came to their desert wilderness to teach them, and to student teachers who had to teach some classes without regular teachers. Their credits were good and accepted by all schools on the outside when they were later to relocate to schools in Colorado, Illinois and elsewhere.

There was confusion in California, in those summer months of 1942. The farmers were especially bewildered. Government agencies were exhorting them to raise bumper crops to feed U.S. troops and our allies. On the other hand, the government was putting Japanese farmers into internment camps while their crops were still in the ground and removing farm hands before harvest time.

One of the earliest and loudest howls went up from poultry producers all over the U.S. having to do with the mysterious practice called “chick sexing.” The science of chick sexing—i.e., determining whether a day-old chicken is a rooster or pullet—was discovered by a Japanese. In 1942, people of Japanese descent made up about 90% of the professional check sexers in America, and now most of them were in Assembly Centers. Poultry producers could not profitably operate without these experts. Chick sexers were paid according to the number of baby chicks they handled. Curiously, the Japanese could handle 1,200 per hour, making very good money, while the so-called Caucasians could not do more than 400 per hour, resulting in them not making much money. The “scream” that went out from the poultrymen in the summer of 1942 was so loud that the Government released all the qualified chick sexers from the Assembly Centers so they could practice their profession, however none were allowed to work in the West Coast restricted zone.

Additionally, seasonal farm workers of Japanese ancestry were eventually permitted to work for sugar beet producers.

Altogether approximately 10,000 evacuees left Assembly and Relocation Centers in 1942 for seasonal agricultural work, principally in Idaho, Utah,

Montana, Colorado, and Oregon. By the end of 1942, the evacuees were being enthusiastically praised as model workmen.

Margaret's older brothers were allowed to go help harvest the Idaho sugar beet crop, the Idaho potato crop, and pitched many tons of hay. They were all anxious to be allowed to do this type of work being paid prevailing wages and the chance to be out from behind barbed wires. During the harvest of 1943, Margaret remembers many of her friends being allowed to go pick sugar beets and how devastated she was because her mother refused to permit her 14-year-old daughter from going with her friends. The manpower situation must have been desperate when they allowed 14 and 15-year-old girls out of camp to work in the fields.

Interestingly enough, the National Student Relocation Council, concerned itself with the problem of facilitating Japanese American born students continuing their college educations. Margaret's brother Bill, was one of the fortunate students receiving clearance by the San Francisco F.B.I., to attend the State College of Washington for two years, thus losing no time in furthering his education. Proposals that evacuee students be admitted to state colleges and universities generally met with emphatic opposition, e.g., requests from the WRA (War Relocation Authority) for extension courses, library books, and faculty lectures for the evacuees in Arizona had been consistently denied. "We are at war and these people are our enemies."

On July 13, 1942, James Purcell, a San Francisco based attorney filed a habeas corpus petition, challenging the exclusion of Japanese Americans that made it impossible for Mitsuye Endo, a 22-year-old clerical worker for the California Department of Motor Vehicles to return to her job. Endo had a brother in the U.S. Army. Endo agreed to serve as the test case to defend the rights of the larger group. Purcell's petition was supported by the American Civil Liberties Union and other liberal groups. In July, 1942, Endo's habeas corpus petition was argued in San Francisco and in July 1943, the petition was dismissed. In August 1943, Purcell appealed Endo's case to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th circuit. In March 1944, as the 9th Circuit prepared to hear Endo's appeal, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the similar Korematsu case, which involved the initial removal and exclusion of Japanese Americans from the west Coast. Purcell and the ACLU lawyers decided that having the 2 cases argued together would strengthen the case against the Executive order calling for the exclusion.

In October 1944, the Endo and Korematsu cases were both argued before the U.S. Supreme Court. On December 18, 1944—also the same day as it announced its ruling in the Korematsu case—the Supreme Court

unanimously decided in Endo's favor. The opinion, authored by Justice William O. Douglas, began:

We are of the view that Mitsuye Endo should be given her liberty. In reaching that conclusion we do not come to the underlying constitutional issues which have been argued. For we conclude that whatever power the War Relocation Authority may have to detail other classes of citizens, it has no authority to subject citizens who are concededly loyal to its leave procedure.

This broke the dam. Within 48 hours, it was announced that the West Coast mass exclusion orders would be revoked, effective January 2, 1945. With the exception of certain individuals, the Japanese Americans were free to go home again. Of course, few of them had homes or businesses to go back to, as was the case with Margaret's family.

Things were different after the war and their release from the interment camp. They had lost everything. Margaret never had any bitterness after the war. After spending a year back in Seattle, the family ended up in Chicago where there were jobs. Margaret's mother had lost a lot. Mostly the hard part was that Margaret's father was sick after having a stroke that paralyzed the left side of his body, leaving him unable to work.

Two of Margaret's older siblings got married in 1946 and had to work to support their families. So, Margaret and her mother had to work. Her three younger siblings went to school.

Margaret worked for the Social Security Administration for a year. She applied to The University of Chicago, was accepted, but Margaret's mother said she had to work. So, she worked full time and took some classes part time. Margaret ended up working as the secretary to the Dean of the U of C Dean at the school of business. Was that fair? Margaret said "It was just the way it was." She feels that she learned along the way, the research she did into her family's history - into the U.S. government records related to her family's interment available through The Freedom of Information Act, was all for the benefit of the children and grandchildren, who are interested in all this. While taking a U.S. History class at Bradley University, she wrote a detailed 46-page family history, leaving a rich legacy for her grandchildren. She also participated in an hour long interview in 2011, detailing her family's experiences.

Margaret married Frank Jr, in 1953 and the following year John, their only child was born. Frank owned a drug store in Skokie, Illinois. Whenever

Frank got sick, Margaret would fill in at the store, but couldn't fill prescriptions. Once John entered college, Margaret, with the credits she had from the University of Chicago and junior college, went to the university for 3 years and graduated with a degree in pharmacy. However, upon graduation, she decided not to work in the drug store, instead enjoyed working for 22 years in a Skokie hospital pharmacy. While in pharmacy school, she made friends with many Asian people, from Hong Kong, Korea, mostly from China. However, she did not share her experiences with the others because it was something in the past and they were all moving forward with their studies and their lives.

In 2015, the year after Frank Jr., her husband of 61 years died, Margaret moved from Morton Grove, Illinois to Tucson to be near family and started attending St. Mark's UMC.

The above article was written using information from a paper that Margaret wrote for a U.S. History Class entitled "Relocation Camp Memories of Margaret Morita Hiratsuka"; as well as from the Margaret Junko Morita Hiratsuka Interview conducted on 6-15-2011 by Densho - Visual History Collection, Skokie, Illinois, Interviewer: Tom Ikeda. This interview is available for viewing on line.

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