

CITIZEN 13660

Miné Okubo





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TO THE MEMORY
OF MY MOTHER

Preface to the 1983 Edition

Forty-one years have passed since Pearl Harbor, the United States declaration of World War II, and the evacuation and internment of more than 110,000 people of Japanese descent—nearly two-thirds of them American citizens. Most of the first generation Issei and many of the second generation Nisei are deceased. All of the ten internment camps have disappeared in the remote desert and mountain areas where they were hurriedly built. The only surviving traces are pieces of concrete, pipes, and wire, and, in some of the camps, cemetery markers of the evacuees who died while in camp. Memorial monuments in stone have been erected in Manzanar and Tule Lake, and in other camps not so remotely removed. February 19, the day Executive Order 9066 was issued, has been named Remembrance Day by the Japa-

nese Americans. Families and organizations make annual pilgrimages to keep the memory of the camp experience alive for the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of the internees. The last camp had been closed in the spring of 1945, shortly before the end of the war.

Chinese and Japanese immigration to the United States took place principally on the West Coast, with the majority settling in California, and had a history marred by prejudice, hate, and economic fears. The Exclusion Act of 1924 had prohibited further immigration of people of Japanese descent and those already in the country were forbidden by law to become citizens, nor were they allowed to own property. In most parts of the country, little was known of the Japanese people in America.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the "yellow peril" hysteria was revived. The propaganda against the Japanese spread quickly across the country. President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, ordering the mass evacuation from the West Coast and internment of all people of Japanese descent. The United States Army took charge. Within three weeks, race tracks, fair grounds, and parks were made over into assembly centers. Within three months, 110,000 people of Japanese parentage were moved from their homes. Later, they were sent to ten permanent camps: two in Arizona, two in Arkansas, two in California, and one each in Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. One camp, in Tule Lake, California, was for supposedly "disloyal" persons. Also the U.S. Department of Justice camps held 3,000 Japanese aliens considered potentially dangerous by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Incidentally, no cases of disloyalty were found in the camps. The Japanese Americans' part in the war effort in the Far East and the bravery and sacrifice of the much-honored 442nd Battalion of Japanese American soldiers proved further the loyalty to the United States of those of Japanese ancestry.

In the history of the United States this was the first mass evacuation of its kind, in which civilians were re-

moved simply because of their race. Nothing had been prepared or planned for this rushed and forced evacuation. There were untold hardships, sadness, and misery.

At the time of the evacuation, I had just returned from two years of travel and study in Europe on a University of California/Berkeley Fellowship and was working on the Federal Arts Program doing mosaic and fresco murals commissioned by the United States Army. Although curfew was from 8:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M. and we were not allowed to go beyond a five-mile radius of our home, I received a special permit to travel from Berkeley to Oakland so that I could finish the murals before being evacuated to Tanforan.

In the camps, first at Tanforan and then at Topaz in Utah, I had the opportunity to study the human race from the cradle to the grave, and to see what happens to people when reduced to one status and condition. Cameras and photographs were not permitted in the camps, so I recorded everything in sketches, drawings, and paintings. *Citizen 13660* began as a special group of drawings made to tell the story of camp life for my many friends who faithfully sent letters and packages to let us know we were not forgotten. The illustrations were intended for exhibition purposes.

I left camp when *Fortune* magazine asked me to come to New York to help illustrate the April 1944 issue on Japan. I then decided to make New York my home. In 1946 *Citizen 13660*, the first personal documentation of the evacuation story, was published by Columbia University Press.

Time mellows the harsh and the grim. I remember the ridiculous, the insane, and the humorous incidents and aspects of camp life. I was an American citizen, and because of the injustices and contradictions nothing made much sense, making things comical in spite of the misery. Crazy things were constantly happening in the camp, with close to ten thousand people confined in an area a mile square. There was no privacy. There was plenty of laughter in sharing discomforts, creating imaginative rumors and stories, and daydreaming wishful

hopes. The different personalities and incidents come back to me often and I smile and wonder what happened to the poor souls.

After the war, California and the West Coast states were no longer restricted areas, and many of the evacuees who had relocated in the East and elsewhere now returned to build a new life. The close ties between Issei parents and Nisei children continued, only this time the parents were dependent upon their children. The Issei had lost their homes, businesses, farms, and everything they had struggled and suffered to build against the odds of prejudice, hate, and harassment, and most of them were too old to start again. After the war the Issei were at last given their rights to become citizens.

For the Nisei, evacuation had opened the doors of the world. After the war, they no longer had to return to the little Tokyos of their parents. The evacuation and the war had proved their loyalty to the United States.

The war was forgotten in the fifties. People throughout the country were busy rebuilding their lives. The country prospered and there were many signs of progress, including better communications generally and media far more open in their reporting. By 1960, however, when John F. Kennedy was elected president, imperfections in politics and elsewhere were quite apparent and young idealists were becoming aware of the many flaws and injustices in the Establishment. All the disastrous events—the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Viet Nam war, the assassination of President Kennedy, and the sad plight of the Viet Nam veterans—led to the rebellious mood of the late sixties.

For the third generation Sansei, the children of Nisei parents, the seriousness of the evacuation had at first been difficult to comprehend since many of them were born in the camps and others were born after the war and evacuation. By the 1970s, however, they were growing up and many were in college. When they understood what had happened to their parents and grandparents during World War II, they were incensed. They were very much concerned with all of the Asian countries and with Asian immigration to the United States. Asian stud-

ies centers were established first in colleges in the West and then nationwide. The Sansei became strongly organized and a force behind the redress movement to right the injustices suffered by Japanese Americans and to demand reparation for those evacuated and interned.

By this time the Nisei were in their prime, holding top positions in a variety of fields, including politics and government. (Today, we have a Nisei governor, two Nisei U.S. senators, two Nisei members of the House of Representatives, and mayors in several cities.) The Nisei were a well-organized group ready to bring to the world the injustice of the internment. From the mid-1970s through 1981, the story was spread widely in the news. Liberated minds of the time were interested, because generations of Americans did not know that this had ever happened in the United States to other American citizens. Books, articles, plays, exhibitions, television programs, and movies followed. Japanese Americans organized the redress movement to demand reparation for Japanese Americans and Alaskan Aleuts who had been forcibly removed from their homes and incarcerated in concentration camps.

Congress took measures to investigate the demands. The U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians was established in July 1980, and in 1981 ten public hearings were held in cities in the United States, including three in Alaska. Oral and written testimony was presented to the Commission by many evacuees and others.

I testified at the hearing in New York City. As *Citizen 13660* had been widely reviewed and was considered an important reference book on the Japanese American evacuation and internment, I presented the Commission with a copy of the book in addition to my oral testimony. In my testimony I stressed the need for young people from grade school through college to be educated about the evacuation. I believe that some form of reparation and an apology are due to all those who were evacuated and interned.

The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment is still active as this is written, and a report of its

recommendations is expected early in 1983. The patient, tireless endeavor on the part of the Nisei and Sansei to right the wrong done during the war is commendable. The shocking story of the evacuation and internment of more than 110,000 people of Japanese descent is recorded for American history. The world now knows that this did happen in the United States.

I am often asked, why am I not bitter and could this happen again? I am a realist with a creative mind, interested in people, so my thoughts are constructive. I am not bitter. I hope that things can be learned from this tragic episode, for I believe it could happen again.

I wish to express my belated acknowledgment to Deborah Calkins, then with *Fortune* magazine, and Harold Laskey, then with Columbia University Press, for their assistance in making *Citizen 13660* possible.

January 1983

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When England and France declared war on September 3, 1939, I had been traveling in Europe a year on an art fellowship from the University of California. I was stranded in Switzerland with nothing but a toothbrush. Everything that I owned was in Paris. The train fare from Budapest to Berne took my last cent and the money I had expected had not arrived at the American Express Office. Mail service was suspended and the French border was closed.



Fortunately, I had friends living near Berne. After visiting around for a while, I ended up on a farm. Poland had been bombed and invaded, Switzerland feared invasion and all the men had been mobilized. As the situation grew steadily worse, my Swiss friends advised me to return home. I waited three months trying to arrange passage through France. A letter arrived from home saying that Mother was seriously ill. I decided to leave at once.



At the French Consulate in Berne I learned that a transit visa to France would be given me if I secured a reservation on a boat sailing from a French port.

My Swiss friends loaned me the money for the boat fare. I sailed on the last boat leaving Bordeaux. It was crowded with refugees who told me vivid stories of their experiences.



I arrived in New York with exactly twenty-five cents, but collect telegrams fixed everything. I was soon safely home in California. However, the joy of my return was cut short by my mother's death.

Not long afterwards I found myself on the road again—this time to settle with a younger brother at Berkeley in the San Francisco Bay region.