

## This isn't Japan

By Mary Oyama

Valley Forge" is four doors over from "Grand Central Station"; across the street "Dreamsville" adjoins "Higa's Den." This is Santa Anita Assembly Center, in itself a paradoxical anomaly.

Here thousands of Americans with Japanese faces, evacuated from their Pacific Coast homes, are taking interment in stride and managing despite many inconveniences and hardships, to maintain their sense of humor and "Yankee" fortitude. Along with their parents, who have been technically classified as "enemy aliens," these Americans of Japanese ancestry comprise a good-size town (about 18,500) of Oriental-faced inhabitants who speak English, sling American slang, jitterbug according to the most streamlined 1942 tradition, who prefer to sing "Dip in the Heart of Texas" to some minor-keyed Japanese folk-song, and who worry--down under the surface-- as to their future status in this country that is also theirs.

The swank Santa Anita track with its "super" turquoise grandstand, from which cheering thousands once witnessed the lightning grace of "Seabiscuit" as well as crooner Bing Crosby's hopefuls, is now surrounded by row of tar-papered barracks; the stables, as well, have been converted into living quarters for the evacuees. The recreation halls under the grandstand, where movie stars and the smart set once mingled with track betters and horsing enthusiasts, now house hundreds of black-haired "slant-eyed" but not "sinister" young Japanese Americans. For here by the rows of windows marked "\$2.00," "\$5.00," "To Place," "To Show," "\$25.00," etc., are their schools and classes, both for children and adults.

Most of the music that pours from the radios down in the barracks and stables is "hot"--with the feverish, hectic tempo which is the delight of all good jivesters. At the weekly jam sessions the boys come wearing their jerk hats and "zoot suits with the reat pleats," looking more like the Oriental version of Good Ole Siwash--vintage 1909--than the smiling, bespectacled, buck-toothed fascist of the cartoons. The girls are far from being stolid, plumpish, and peasant-like. They have plenty of oomph, and the Caucasian male visitors to the Assembly Center swear they have never seen a better-looking group of girls in all their lives.

When these American Nisei boys and girls walk down the street romantically holding each others' hands or chummily arm-in-arm, the older generation, the Issei, do not know whether to look discreetly away or to be nonchalant and simply look on. They are not yet accustomed to this typically Occidental phenomenon of frank display of affection between the sexes, something unheard of in Japan. They are embarrassed at the unembarrassedness of their Nisei children, but now they are gradually becoming accustomed to it like anything else.

When the first hot spell of the summer came on, for instance, many of the oldsters expressed consternation at pretty Nisei girls in ultra-modern playsuits with abbreviated shorts, "bra" tops, and bare midriffs. "Hadaka!" they exclaimed. "Nude!" But the girls continued to wear them. When young married couples first came into the Assembly camp and set up separate quarters of their own instead of living with their immediate families or with their in-laws, some Issei "tch-tched." But the Nisei insisted upon their American way. "This isn't Japan," they declared.

Two items, however, do add a touch of Japan to the Center--the parasols--though, to be sure, the parasols are mostly American; and the clattering of wooden Japanese shoes. These "getas" with their high cleats are very effective for avoiding contact with the shower-room floors and are much more practical on the dirt streets of Santa Anita than any sandal or bedroom slipper.

Otherwise the atmosphere is strictly "American."

Down the street comes a gang of small "geta"-shod boys. "Aw, you don't hafta get so sore about it," one bawls out, and the other counters belligerently, "Who's sore?"

The taller one: "You are!"



"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah!

"Yeah!

"Yeah!

He is about a head shorter but he holds his own despite the fact that the tall guy has his chin thrust menacingly near his nose. Truce is declared and they walk on, while the tots sitting on homemade benches at the side of the streets, who have been watching this episode anticipating an interesting fight, resume their reading of Superman and Buck Rogers.

Perhaps it was their big brothers who scribbled "Restricted--\$45.00 per month" on the dusty windows of an unoccupied barrack unit nearby. "No Japs," they added with ironic humor. In the same key was the request at the weekly sign under the oak trees for the "Prisoner's Song." The same thin thread of irony--the gallantry of a generation trying to laugh off unpleasant circumstances--lies beneath the joking banter of the older adolescents who jibe the Nisei policemen by calling them "Gestapo"; who yell out "sabotage" and "Pearl Harbor" whenever someone "pulls a dirty trick" eighter in cards or practical joking.

Most of the time youth can "laugh it off." But sometimes there is bitterness. And often there is fear. I think of the Nisei boy who worries about the newspapers indiscriminately referring to us as "Japanese." "Whether we're citizens or not! That gets me down! They always refer to us as 'Japs' or 'American Japanese'--they're trying to make the public believe we're all 'Japs' instead of the Americans that we are."

Once, after a long hot afternoon, I heard an Nisei father happily singing a Japanese song. Darkness had settled; the after-twilight coolness had brought everybody out of their over-warm quarters to enjoy the respite from the day's heat. 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 my 12-year-old neighbor, Elsie. I tried to recall what sort of things used to embarrass me when I was her age---

Across the street I could see a door ajar revealing an American flag at "Valley Forge." I had mine sent in by a friend on the "outside" after I had heard a Nisei girl say, "You know, evry unit in every barrack should have an American flag in it so that the Nisei and especially the young children will always know this is America--so they will not forget what their flag looks like. Locked in here with nothing but Japanese and cut off from American contacts, we might lose something. We musn't ever forget that we're Americans."

At Manzanar (the Owens Valley Relocation Center) a little Nisei boy interned there told his mother he was tired of "Japan" where there were nothing but Japanese. He wanted to go back to "America."

So do all of us.

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Mary Oyama appeared in our Spring issue with a brief sketch, "After Pearl Harbor." She is now in the Santa Anita Assembly Center with her husband and two small children.

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