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AMERICA'S REFUGEES: EXODUS AND DIASPORA

California is about to pay a debt. Some 40,000 workers and farmers from the West Coast will migrate in 1943 and 1944 into midwestern lands whence other thousands, a few years ago, fled dust, drought, and despair to seek new fortunes in the Golden West. The forces of Nature, made dangerous through man's mishandling of the soil, drove the Okies into unplanned and unprotected flight. In California, it was social and economic forces -- among them some of the most dangerous in American life -- that forced military and civilian agencies to undertake the greatest planned and controlled migration in our history: the movement of the American Japanese.

These people were not, and are not, dangerous. In spite of rumors, repeatedly denied by all official sources, there is no record of a single act of violence or sabotage either in California or in Hawaii, where tens of thousands of American Japanese were employed on secret military preparations, and where other thousands have volunteered for combat duty. In California, their major crime was to have created hundreds of millions of dollars in agricultural wealth, which some of their neighbors sought to control by forcing the racial issue with the forced draught of war fears.

What we as a nation are doing to these people, however, is dangerous. It is dangerous to our faith in ourselves as democratic people, opposed to the arbitrary exclusion of any group from membership in our nation

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on grounds of race or color. It is dangerous to all minorities, and to their faith in the democratic solution of their differences. And, certainly not least, it is dangerous to our interests in the Pacific, where the faith and credit of America's democracy is being measured by her treatment of Oriental minorities.

Since we have embarked on this venture, we have to carry it through. It is possible to turn it into a channel of permanent advantage to the American Japanese themselves, and into a triumphant example of successful assimilation of what had been a "problem" group. Whether or not the outcome is to our credit depends on three factors: the attitudes and preparation of the evacuees, the organization and backing of the War Relocation Authority, and the understanding and active cooperation of you people, and people like you, in your cities and in all cities across this continent.

The evacuee going East faces not prejudice, which he had made some adjustment to on the Coast, but a dense wall of ignorance about the American Japanese. East of the Rockies, people are surprised to learn that these people are citizens, and speak English, and have high technical and professional competence. The West Coast evacuee, on his side, is equally ignorant of the central and eastern areas and cultures. He is as provincial as a Bostonian.

The task on both sides is one of education. In the long run, the only education is that that results from face-to-face acquaintance, side-by-side living and working. But, as the pioneers begin to move eastward, we who

have lived and worked with them through the period of evacuation and relocation can at least offer, to you who will be receiving these neo-migrants, some clues as to what a year of discriminatory seclusion has done to prepare them for American life.

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Imagine, first, a flat brown plain, from which the flood-fattened mesquite has been torn up by the roots, leaving gritty brown talcum-powder dust a foot deep over all the baking treeless miles, shimmering under the 120-degree heat of Arizona. Now, project upon that desolation a square mile of black tarpaper barracks, a hundred feet long by twenty wide, placed row on row in mathematical monotony.

Into a roped-off area roll the enormous busses, filled with people exhausted by the relentless drive through the baked valleys of inland California. Out of the busses, down the lines of tables, showing papers and signing papers and receiving papers, slowly move the families: the old farmer, head of the family, and the son or daughter who does the talking for him, while mother and grandparents shepherd the round-eyed restless children. At the end of the line, the family gathers itself, rescues its meagre handbaggage from the pile, and climbs into a canvas-covered Army truck which will drop them at the door assigned to them. The hot sun fades redly, the bleak electric lights insult the lifting moon; the choking dust rises slowly in a solid shroud over the stage; and still the line moves on, the sleeping children on their parents' sagging shoulders, the ice-water gone from the iron buckets, the working crews

still checking the family lists and assigning them to rooms. The trucks transport the last family to its room and leave it there with its grandeur: 20x25 feet of pine floor, canvas Army cots rolled up and wired obstinately, a cotton bag for each cot's mattress, and a bale of straw to fill them with before the travelers can rest. The last harried mother has returned to search the luggage pile for mislaid bundles -- the lost nighties, the undiscovered blankets, the missing soap and toothbrush and the baby's bottle. The staff, the registrants, and the guides have trudged back to their rooms, aching with the burden of those thousand lonely, patient apprehensive people, robbed of what had been their past and future, and given in exchange this faceless poverty, these barracks and this straw. Only the moon is left to watch over the littered tables, the trampled ground, the exhausted sleepers: the moon, and the solid cloud of dust still standing in the motionless air.

Then, I would have you visit the block with me a week later. The meagre piles of scrap lumber, left by the contractor, have melted into tables, chairs, and shelves. Blankets have been hung for privacy, and all the block's washing hangs along improvised lines beside the laundry house. Beside some of the barracks, the ground is furrowed, seeds are in, laths make a fence and a shade for the doorway. A block manager, with one room for his office, issues keys and tools and toilet paper and soap. Hoses from the spigot outside each barrack are damping down the dust, or giving the cracked floors their daily washing -- a quick house-cleaning that also cools and lays the dust beneath the house. When the next arrivals pile out of the hot busses to go through the weary intake,

these earlier comers are old residents, who stand outside the ropes to shout "Hey, Bill!" and "Hi, Mariko!" and "Yoohoo, Nakamura San," at friends in the line.

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The blue-print of these cities into which the evacuees were poured, in a sort of benevolent concentration, was made for young male soldiers in active field service. I can imagine no plan less suited to the living of a complex community of families, with all their necessities of work, of worship, of social life and play, of government and administrative services, of privacy and decency, morality and manners. Remember, that when the residents moved in, there was no stick of furniture in any house; no scrap of recreational equipment; no schools; no churches; but little water, even, and that undependable.

Soldiers need little privacy. They are efficiently fed in company mess halls, accommodated in common latrines and unpartitioned showers. But throw into such a naked camp whole families of people who regard privacy as precious. Take away the family dining table, and throw the families into a common mess, where age-groups tend to sit together, dissolving families, weakening the father's headship, destroying conversation and manners.

Go further, now. Place the administration and provision of food, shelter, medical care, clothing, public assistance, in agencies over and above the people. There are no "dependents" on a Project; if Tommy doesn't like the family, he can go live with someone else. His food, his housing, his health, like his education and his placement in a job,

suspend individually from the ceiling of Administration, without the mediation of his parents. Was his family rich? Were the neighbors poor? There is no way to tell, here where all alike live in the shabby and crowded informality of a vacation camp. There are no cars. If some houses show more furniture, salvage from the meagre piles of scrap lumber and forgotten nails; if some yards show flowers or vegetables; if some rooms have crude partitions between the beds of the parents, the children, and the strangers who live with them -- this shows only the ingenuity and aggressiveness of the resident. A comfortable liveable household is the reward of what a man is and does, not of what he was or what he used to have.

But there are limits to what a man can do for himself on the Projects. Most of his family's provision is from what is given. True, the older ones can work, while Grandma cares for the small children and Grandpa polishes his inevitable ironwood. But the Project wage is, generally, sixteen dollars a month; only pocket money for tooth powder and Kleenex and baby food, since the major subsistence is already furnished to worker and non-worker alike. Now,remember that this "managerial" scheme of living is superimposed on people made apprehensive through a succession of uprootings, losses of property, people who were taken from their jobs and homes, stabled where the horses were kept in race-tracks, moved again. People whose defense against apprehension was patient acquiescence. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away...

Remember, further, that the previous culture of these people had been built around the Family, with authority in the father. The father

giveth, and the father taketh away... One obeyed the Government as one had obeyed the father, because that was Authority. And, precisely as a child whose father is rather arbitrary and unpredictable begins to learn to complain, to beg, to wheedle, to manipulate his parents to gain advantage for himself, so on the Projects the evacuees have begun to show that same pattern of response toward the Government that is the source of their hardships and their benefits. What should we have expected? All the familiar ambivalence of children toward a father with complete authority is reappearing in these children of Evacuation. They respect Government, they are overwhelmingly loyal, they want to be told with authority what they shall do. And, at the same time, they resent, they learn to play the Administrators off against each other, they appropriate for their own use whatever the Project has on hand that they feel need of. Mr. Nakamura would never lower himself to steal from Mr. Tanaka; but both men have tables, cupboards, fences, that appeared mysteriously at night, while the evacuee police guarding the lumber pile politely studied the stars.

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The Japanese clusters on the West Coast were self-governing and independent. Seldom did a Japanese name appear on a relief roll or a police blotter. Under the entrenched rule of strong councils of older men, the young men were being readied to take over leadership when the time came. But the time was not yet. The evacuation came too soon. It swept the older leaders into internment, leaving second-raters in charge of the group. It caught the young still in training, still in college and technical school, and in full centrifugal flight from the Japanese-ness

of their parents, out toward acceptance and status in the reluctant Hakujin communities.

In the Projects, political and economic power were stripped from the old men and given to the young. A few years later, it would have been all right. The old men's average age was 59, the young men's barely over twenty. The change was made at a time when the old were almost willing, but not quite; and when the young were almost ready, but not quite. The fathers found Administration and planning taken from their hands and monopolized by their English-speaking sons who worked with and for the Hakujin. So the old men took to their avocations, cultivated their plants, and criticized the young.

The young men had been preoccupied with their own training for individual function and status. The control of a Japanese community was the last thing they wanted. Deprived of the accustomed leaders, they felt insecure, inadequate; in consequence, they both relied on and resisted the Administration. They found themselves under fire both from their elders and from their supervisors; and few among them wanted or would accept conspicuous responsibility. Responsibility meant "sticking your neck out"; and the young men fell back on the old Japanese habit of sharing responsibility among all the members of a group, without officers or ranks. They are uneasy in the American patterns of committees, chairmen, delegates. With the exception of a few whose American experience had habituated them to these forms, the Nisei preferred to remain on the sidelines or in the crowd, while he kept his eye out for his own individual opportunity of

advancement, status, or escape.

Nothing dismayed the young people so much as being thrown back into the enormous colonies of Japanese. Almost every young person I know on the Project has said to me, in despair, "I never saw so many Japanese people before in all my life"; and some have added, "You know, I don't like these Japs." But America had said to them, "You're all Japanese in here"; their parents had used that leverage to reestablish the old controls; the babies and school children found themselves talking Japanese instead of English, under Grandma's tutelage; and the Nisei youth felt himself trapped in a racial pool whose banks were too high to climb out of. Rejected by the Army, in which thousands of their kinsmen were serving, and listed as "4-C", "neutral aliens," their bitterness was real and deep. And a few of them went under.

Yet, to us who lived in these towns, the prevailing tone has always been astonishingly American. Every block has had its baseball and basketball teams. Sunday and Wednesday see dozens of church services, prayer meetings, bible classes, and "singspirations" in rooms set aside for the strong fundamentalist-revivalist religion of the residents. The Buddhist young people carry on ardent forums and socials. As one walked down the long streets in the dusk, when the fierce heat had abated and life was expanding into front yards and stoops, it was a peaceful village scene. Neighbors called across from door to door; young people in threes and fours exchanged the evening gossip and repartee of young people America over; from behind the barracks came the shrill yells of "1-2-3 for Janet" and (a version I

never heard outside Minneapolis before) "Ole-ole-olson free!" The tone was familiarly American, its overtones the quick foreign syllables of the old people as one has heard such overtones in Milwaukee, in San Francisco, in Hamtramack and St. Louis.

Even the older mothers were launched into an unheard-of emancipation. Freed of the drudgery of field and house work, they flocked into English classes, needlework and flower-making and art classes, into Mothers' Clubs where they made a valiant beginning at the job of pulling themselves up by each others' bootstraps, from the 1870 Japan of their former lives into the American 1940's where their children lived.

The old culture, the old music and poetry and drama, still flourish on the Projects. But if one had doubts about the Project being in America, they were forever stilled as he stood on the barren dust to hear two hundred young voices coming from improvised bleachers where, in Government issue mackinaws and homemade dresses, the Massed Choir sent "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" and "Adeste, Fideles" rolling out against the silence of the desert, the yelping of the coyotes, and the blazing stars. They were stilled when he stood in the hushed attentive ring of thousands around those bleachers again as the symphony orchestra of school children and old men and teachers played the music of Russia, of France, of England, of Vienna, and of Dixie.

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In the newly-settled blocks of the Project, one saw at first the small children being carried everywhere by their parents. Around the barracks, along the roads, in the Canteen, at the shows, it seemed as

though half the shoulders had those lively round black eyes peering over them. At first I thought it was to keep the children out of the dust; but that was impossible. Then I thought the children were frightened, clinging to their parents; but I saw that they were not afraid, and wanted to be set down. At last I understood that it was the parents who were frightened, who were lost, and clinging to their children.

Gradually, the horizon of security widened, and the children were set down to run at liberty. But the dismal diapason of anxiety remains the deepest and most universal index to the behavior of the evacuees. To an unprecedented extent, their lives have become a quest for security. It is far from the only index; but every attitude, from that toward authority to that toward jobs and Relocation, is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of anxiety.

This is the thing that makes these people, after their shocks and losses and abrupt moves, cling to whatever spot they happen to have fallen into in the Project. Like shipwrecked sailors on a raft, each family clings to its own room, its little pool or garden. Even overcrowded families, quarreling with each other, refuse to move to empty rooms a block or two away.

And this same anxiety, with all its origins and all its still-valid justifications, is making it difficult for us to persuade people to leave the Projects where it is suicide for them to remain. This is what I must make you understand.

The insecurity of the young employables dates from their struggle to escape from the well-integrated Japanese cluster, out into age-group

and job association with the Hakujin: to escape their restricted and disadvantaged position, into equal acceptance in status and function. But California -- far more than Hawaii, whose few evacuees show significant differences in attitude -- screened them out, forced them back into Japanese employment far below the level of their training. A few were getting through the screen, out into technical positions and FSA homes. Others had come to see that their only avenue of escape into status was through technical channels. Throughout the extraordinary school record of the Nisei runs this almost exclusive emphasis on technical vocational training. In the Army, most of the Nisei were technical men -- and most of those, sergeants.

Along with their training, the Nisei sought a foothold through Hakujin friends, usually school teachers or church and Y workers, or classmates. The evacuation, sweeping all along regardless of citizenship, Army service, or criminal record, denied at once their training and their friendships, and called them Japanese. Today, the nation is inviting them back into membership. That is the most important step this country has yet taken in the prosecution of its claim to democratic war aims. But the success of this step will not be automatic. The nation has some earlier sins to expiate.

The young person in the Projects now is doubtful whether he will be accepted as an American. He is over-self-conscious about his color and features; seeing few others for a year, he has forgotten what a variety of masks the American wears. He will apply for a job; if you accept him, as often as not he will change his mind. It is our job -- ours on the

Project and yours out here -- to create the opportunities, the securities, which will build a center of gravity in the midwest to out-pull the center of gravity that the Project offers.

Economically, the Project itself offers the most security. But it is precisely from that kind of security that these Americans must be rescued, and as soon as possible. The only security the evacuees had asked or that any American has the right to ask for now, is the sense of belonging to this nation, and the right to share in its vicissitudes on an equal basis. If more and more of the evacuees in our Projects are beginning to ask for more -- for duration care, at public expense, without responsibility -- this is our own fault. It is up to us to correct it by restoring these people to self-responsible participation in the common world of jobs, rationing, and universal uncertainty.

At first, we thought of the Projects as settled communities, to last for the duration. We know now that that was wrong; that they can be only the waiting rooms for Americans en route to new stations. You don't seriously try to maintain institutions for education and government in a waiting room. In ours, we have given people jobs to do to pass the time; most Project jobs are leisure-time activities carried on in working hours. Fine minds, trained skills, are wasting on the Projects. Untrained youth, robbed of their chance at training by the evacuation, have there no chance to make it up. The Project is in effect a concentrated racial WPA camp, with the old characteristics of made-work and relief wages breeding the old attitudes toward work, toward Government as a source

of obligatory benefits, toward organized begging as a responsible mode of life. As one whose life interest is Education, I hate and fear the education that the Project experience is giving my fellow Americans. Old, young, and children, I believe that there is none who cannot find some way to enter our common life again; let even the criminals enter our common jails, and the ill our hospitals.

The most courageous of the young people, and some of the old, have held their faith in their American identification. These are, in general, the ones who held responsible positions on the Projects; and the ones also who are going out first. A small number has lost faith entirely, and been convinced that their future lies with Japan. Most of these will not leave the Projects for some time. In between is the greater number; unhappy where they are, but fearful of their acceptance and their future outside: "Who will take care of me if I lose my job?" they ask; and they are the first of Japanese descent in this country to ask such a question. Most of all, these people are watching the careers of those who go out first.

These pioneer emogres are very conscious of their responsibility as ambassadors. They are the dove from the Ark. In your fair and friendly acceptance of these emissaries is your greatest hope to the reclaiming of thousands of first-class Americans, Americans who must be saved from sub-citizen status, from permanent dependency, from defeat by the fears we ourselves have instilled into them.

They still tend to seek their fortunes individually, as opportunity offers. Characteristically, they are not sympathetic with other minorities,

and have never identified themselves with Labor. In the stress of their escape into status, they usually ignore the larger collective issues.

Yet, in every crisis, they have responded to the wider loyalties. In the face of demobilization and evacuation, more than a thousand of the eligible young men have volunteered for Army combat service. Thousands more are waiting only to be drafted; and hundreds of the girls are clamoring for admission to the WAACS. Other hundreds, in the face of the contractor's betrayal of his contract with them, voted to continue breaking all production records in turning out camouflage nets for the fighting troops.

These young people who are coming to your cities are not Japanese. They are Americans who like pie and Jack Benny and want to fly against the Japs and the Axis. They are without leadership of their own, still seeking their security and their models among the Hakujin. When one is friendly, and gives them genuine share in the work to be done, no workers could be more conscientious or devoted. One's friendships with them are warm and wholehearted. But they are unsure of their welcome, and easily estranged. They need to be taken into our churches, not left to form their own; into our clubs, our unions, our committees.

When they come out into St. Louis, into Rockford, into Mankato, to whom shall they turn? The churches are, once again, out in front, helping the WRA with a job that is too big for one agency to do. But will the Defense agencies, the volunteer services, the social agencies, the League of Women Voters, the Farm Bureaus, accept them into membership? Will landlords combine to force them into Little Tokios again? And what will

the social workers and their agencies be doing if that happens?

Here come more Americans. In their reinstatement lies our hope in ourselves, and faith in us by other nations. No people on earth needs America more than these, at this time; and there are none whom America needs more, or who will serve her better.

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