

# Our Racial Refugees

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**A community analyst for the War Relocation Authority tells why individual attention is necessary in replanting lives uprooted in the mass.**

TWO YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE OUR government sanctioned the first large scale forcible movement of population ever attempted in this country—the evacuation by the army of 110,000 Japanese and Americans of Japanese descent to the interior from their long established homes on the West Coast. [See *Survey Mid-monthly*: "Evacuation, American Style," April 1942, "Evacuation, American Style, Part II," October 1942, "In the Relocation Centers," January 1943, by George D. Nickel; and "From Barbed Wire to Communities," September 1943, by Clarence E. Pickett and Homer L. Morris.] Announcements from the beginning indicated that though the evacuees were to be held in camps without regard to their citizenship or record of loyalty, such internment would be only temporary.

Yet today the large majority of persons, both Americans and aliens, who were thus uprooted in the spring of 1942 are still living in segregated colonies, known as relocation centers. This is in spite of the fact that since October 1942, the government, through its administrative agency, the War Relocation Authority, has been bending efforts to help the evacuees (except a few "disloyal" and their families, who have been congregated in one camp), to take up normal life again in normal communities away from the Western Defense Command. What is it that makes this progress of resettlement so slow?

## A Problem of Individuals

Social workers will perhaps not be too puzzled by this question, for they know that any program involving people as individuals cannot produce results overnight. And "the powers that be" have found that though it was possible to uproot with ease in the mass, replanting can only be effected successfully on an individual basis. Thus the government finds itself involved in an intricate job of social work.

In the beginning, when the WRA initiated its resettlement program, it was thought that jobs and the promise of a receptive public were all that was needed to induce the evacuees to pull up stakes again and leave the centers. But events proved otherwise. Even when the manpower shortage made jobs plentiful and lessened antagonisms, the numbers leav-

ing the centers remained small. Those who did venture forth tended to go out singly, leaving their families behind.

It became clear that consideration had to be given to deeper and more basic factors if the program was to be successful—that it would not amount to anything if approached on an unindividualized, mass basis. To break down resistance of the evacuees toward going out in the world again, it would be necessary to understand and reckon with the effects of evacuation on individuals and families.

From 1884 until the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 the Japanese freely emigrated to this country. Most of them came as laborers. By 1940, approximately 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were residing on the West Coast, 70 percent of them American born and thus American citizens. Most of the citizens had never been to Japan, few knew the language, and on the whole they were an Americanized group. The non-citizens, or *issei*, who had been born in Japan, had finally achieved a modicum of security after years of struggle in this country. They were pleased to witness the graduation of their children from American schools and universities, and the exercise by their children of their privileges and rights as American citizens. The *issei* could not be naturalized, since our laws prohibited that. Nevertheless, they could point with pride to their low delinquency and relief rates and the high educational achievements of their children.

Then came Pearl Harbor! The Japanese Americans were as stunned and shocked as the rest of the American public, and were, in addition, gripped with fear. They were aware of the fact that the hostile attitudes of many persons on the West Coast would most likely become more crystallized. But when the evacuation was ordered several months later it was more than they had expected. The *nissei*, the American citizens, were to be included. This they had never anticipated.

The blow was made worse by the fact that in the exodus from the West Coast they sustained serious economic losses. Their properties, which they struggled years to develop, had to be leased or

sold, usually at a loss. Their personal belongings had to be stored away. Their businesses had to be dissolved permanently or suspended for the duration.

Some of them questioned the consistency of evacuation with our democratic principles; others looked on the movement as a necessary and even a protective act. But all were shocked by the new life before them in the isolated relocation centers. Their economic security was gone. Their sensitivity to racial discrimination was intensified and deepened.

## The Relocation Centers

These new, artificial communities are leaving an imprint on the people and contributing to their resistances to resettlement. The real insecurity of the evacuees is camouflaged by the superficial security found in the dependent life of the center. Ironically, its inhabitants, feeling that the centers offer them economic and social security against the outside world, are developing a wardship attitude toward the government. Their search for security is paramount in their motivations.

The type of life a relocation center offers is not conducive to the development of individual independence. It tends rather to deter individuals from resettling. It does this first by bringing to a halt the progress toward assimilation into American life, at a time when anxieties and tensions have been heightened and exaggerated. Then it threatens family standards through overcrowding and poor housing conditions, and in many instances economic destitution, and the result is a weakening of parental control. Parents are beginning to observe for the first time the development in their children of delinquency and anti-social behavior patterns. School interests and work habits are deteriorating. Finally, center life encourages the slow development of a caste system setting off the Caucasian appointed personnel from the evacuees.

These factors have heightened the people's insecurity and have paralyzed their ability to plan their future for themselves. Instead of seizing the opportunity to leave, they build up a resistance to resettlement. Many have become suspicious. They fear the unknown. They prefer to sit and wait. They fail to



recognize resettlement as a practical opportunity to regain their democratic rights.

Recognizing the significance of these resistances to resettlement, WRA has recently inaugurated a counseling program at each of the nine relocation centers. Social workers are now employed to work with families, thus giving them opportunities to discuss individual attitudes, fears, and needs. This attempt to extend help on an individual basis to evacuees facing the problems involved in the readjustment is a new and important step in the WRA program.

#### Strangers in Town

But the counseling and social work begun at the relocation center cannot end when families leave the center. When they enter new communities, as they are now doing, they are faced with numerous problems of adjustment to the world outside, a world which has changed radically since they left it. Since adjustments are not easy to make, the assistance that can be rendered by community social agencies will, in many instances, be needed.

Many of the evacuees, of course, are able to handle their own problems. But some are bound to be confused by the complexities and difficulties of their new life. They arrive in a strange city fearful of an antagonistic public, hesitant to introduce themselves to the people, sensitive, yet wishing desperately to become integrated into the community. Having suffered discrimination on the West Coast, having lived in "Little Tokyos" in many of the cities, and having been subjected to evacuation, they naturally expect to meet with antagonisms. Actually, many of them have found a more receptive attitude in the Middlewest and East than they had previously experienced in the West. Even so, the fear often persists, underlying all the individual's actions.

Many *nissei* have developed the opinion that no more "Little Tokyos" should be built up, and that they themselves should become an integral part of the Caucasian dominated community. This fundamentally sound goal may for some *nissei* develop into an obsession, and lead them to a complete rejection of their own group. For others, who are insecure with Caucasians, it may lead to an avoidance of social contacts in spite of an inner longing for acceptance.

The parents of the *nissei* naturally find it hard to accept this point of view. Although they recognize the tragic significance of the establishment of "Little

Tokyos," they suffer when they see their children dispersed. They wonder where their daughters will find husbands; their sons, wives. They too, wish to be accepted in the American community along with their children. But they realize because they are "aliens" they will never be assimilated and accepted. All they ask is the opportunity to support their families and to live among a few friends with whom they can share old memories and a common language.

On the other hand, the *nissei* usually do not know how to approach communities which are new to them. They are not an aggressive group. They need adequate social expression, as well as good housing and a satisfactory job, but they will not take the initiative in finding the means for such expression. Until the organizations in the community step forward and invite them to participate, they will remain aloof. They need assurance that they will be accepted.

#### On Their Own

Because so many *nissei* have left their families behind and are tackling resettlement by themselves, their youthfulness poses a serious problem, requiring attention and assistance. Most of them have never before been away from home. Their strong paternalistic families kept them close to the family group. Decisions and discussions were made on a family basis. Now, upon relocation, they find themselves alone. Their families have remained in the projects waiting to see how they make out in the world outside. Still hardly more than adolescents, they are faced with the newness of their independence as well as a strange environment. In some cities a few of them have taken up the ways of "zoot suiters," a reaction which is symptomatic of the conflict taking place within them.

It is not only in their social adjustment that these very young *nissei* experience difficulty. Facing responsibility without parental guidance is new to them. For many, the jobs which they take up in the new communities are their first. They were in school just prior to evacuation or had just begun to work, and had not yet learned how to accept the responsibilities and demands of a job. With their new jobs, too, comes the necessity of knowing how to manage money and to budget and plan for themselves.

These problems are typical problems of adolescence, but the *nissei* in numerous instances face them alone, with no guidance. To be sure, many of them manage

very well. But others need help before they will be ready for full independence. Even some older *nissei* face these problems, to a lesser degree, as they, too, are experiencing their first complete separation from their parents. From now on, as the evacuees resettle in family groups rather than singly, some of these problems may be eliminated. But there will probably always be the conflict between the second generation children and their foreign born parents.

In addition to the social and personality needs of resettling evacuees, their economic needs must be considered. After a year or more on a project, family finances have in many cases been depleted. Although grants are given by WRA on the basis of need to persons leaving the center, amounts are small. Many evacuees need an entirely new wardrobe, money for the first month's rent, and for food until the first pay check comes in. Sometimes, where furnished apartments are hard to find, they need money for furniture. Furthermore, they have no protection against illness.

Local public agencies can obtain funds through the Social Security Board to help both citizens and aliens of Japanese ancestry when financial assistance is necessary. But few Japanese Americans were ever on relief before evacuation, and they dread such an experience now. Except in cases of illness, only in rare instances have those who have resettled turned to the public agencies for assistance. However, the number may unavoidably increase until such a time as these uprooted people have been able to integrate themselves into the community and build up their resources.

The adjustment of the evacuees, American citizens and their alien parents, is not only an individual problem, but one of concern to the entire American community. Every institution and agency in a community to which they come to seek a new life has an obligation to help the newcomers become part of the community. This welcome should be extended by the churches, the social agencies, and the business, labor, and social organizations of the city. These people are returning to American life, to contribute to our society and to the prosecution of the war against fascism. They are a part of our country. They are our racial refugees, but they have something to offer to the community.