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By George Morimitsu

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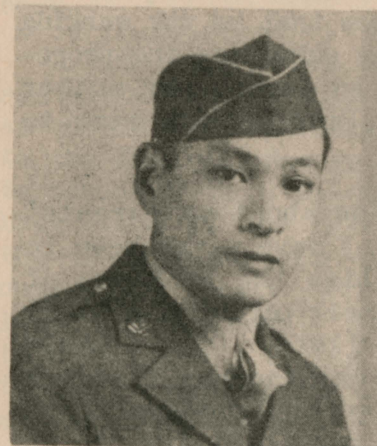
By George Morimitsu

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My parents are living today in one of the relocation camps in the American West. Like the other issei, or first generation of Japanese who came to the United States during the years of greatest migration, they had lived a life of unceasing toil and struggle, in a land which did not understand them but which, they hoped, would provide for their children all the advantages that they had been denied.

There is little that I know of their past. My only connecting link with it would be through the language that we supposedly speak in common. But this we lack and have always lacked since the years we children started learning English at grade school. My mother tongue is English, and theirs Japanese. We have never engaged in long talks as other families do, because we have never understood each other well.

THE AUTHOR



George Morimitsu, who was born in Sacramento, California, writes: "I was raised in the provincial environment of the Japanese community. After encountering the usual difficulties of the nisei in getting decent jobs, I became a state civil service worker, and was so employed before I entered the Army." Corporal Morimitsu has been in training with the Japanese-American Combat Team at Camp Shelby, Mississippi.

Of my father's past, all I know is what I have heard from my mother at scattered intervals. He came to California from Hawaii at an early age, perhaps when he was twenty. He worked as a domestic in a San Francisco family while going to grammar school, one of that breed of issei immigrants known as "Japanese schoolboys." I learned of the hardships he had endured, going to school on a breakfast that consisted of a slice of bread and a cup of coffee. A lone hardboiled egg on Sunday. And for spending money, a fifty cent piece once a month. All this my mother told me when I was a young boy, to emphasize how fortunate I was in getting an education on a full stomach. Being a woman with a good sense of humor, she laughed with me in describing the early-day tribulations of my father.

About my mother, I know just as little. We used to have an old snapshot of her holding an American baby in her arms, so I gathered that she had worked for a family when she had first come to America.

Once my sister asked her how she had happened to marry Father. We had a mutual suspicion that she was one of the notorious picture brides of pre-exclusion days. My mother laughed at this frank question. But she explained how she had come to marry Father. They had been neighbors in the province of Hiroshima in Japan, but neither had known the other well. However, my mother's aunt and uncle, who were already in California, also knew my father and his parents. So when these relatives of my mother decided that my father should get a wife for himself, now that he was working steadily in a grocery store, they submitted the proposition to my mother's parents in Japan. My mother consented to the arrangement, and so she came to California to become a wife.

There is little else I know about my parents' lives prior to their marriage. I have never been in Japan, so I cannot even visualize the province of Hiroshima where my parents and their parents and their families from remote times had lived. Once I heard my mother say in a moment of reminiscence that her family in Japan had included great landowners and village officials. What other personalities ran in the family line, I do not know. For my brother, my sisters and myself, our family line begins in America.

True, we have had some of the culture of Japan brought into our household. We have eaten Japanese food daily as well as stew and hash, and for Boys' Day on the Japanese calendar my mother has hung colored tissue carps from the eave of our roof to give my brother and myself the strength of carp, and on New Year's Day, the traditional holiday of the Japanese, we have feasted on sushi and baked rock cod and gelatin cakes, together with many other delicacies made of rice and fish and bamboo sprouts. Then again, my father has often come home laden with Japanese records which we spent pleasant hours playing on the phonograph. We are a music-loving family, and we enjoyed listening to the minor-keyed refrains of a Japanese tenor and the jumpy-rhythmed beat of a modern orchestra playing popular Japanese songs that showed the influence of occidental music.

But the Japanese vernacular papers my parents read in the evening were meaningless jumbles of type to us. And the Japanese novel my mother spoke of so highly was but so many pages of unintelligible characters. The culture of my parents' homeland ended with the songs we heard and the foods we ate and the holidays my parents observed.

When we children were still young, my mother taught classes in a Japanese language school to augment the income of my father as a produce commission merchant. Then we moved to the city of Sacramento, where my father had bought a restaurant in the lower end. My mother helped in the kitchen to save the wages that would have gone to another cook.

The long hours of work required to keep the restaurant operating daily kept to a minimum the amount of attention my parents could possibly give to the family. But we were fed and clothed and sent to school through the many years that we lived in the back rooms of the restaurant, during which we made the transition from childhood to youth. When the depression slowly settled upon the nation, it paralyzed the business. My father sought work elsewhere to help pay our living expenses while my mother continued to run the restaurant alone. But it was dying a slow death. Finally, one day, while I was still a

senior in high school, we were told the bank could not extend the rent for even another week.

That night I told my mother I was going to quit school. For weeks I had seen the worried expression on her face, though she had never disclosed her fear to any of us, but now I felt that I could stand it no longer. Education became secondary in my mind. I told her I would go out and pick grapes in a vineyard down the river for the few weeks of the season that still remained.

When I said that Mother became angry. She scolded me as though I were but a child again.

She said that I would continue with my education, no matter what happened to the restaurant. With her, she told me then, the education of her children meant more than anything else in her life. That night, when I went to bed, I cried silently into my pillow.

I cannot say that all the issei had the same attitude as had my mother. Some of my acquaintances did not go far in school because their parents did not believe in the value of an education. But the issei with foresight were to sacrifice their own and even their family's comforts to provide an adequate schooling for their children.

Perhaps they realized how badly they themselves lacked the training for which they had never had the time. Perhaps it was a sublimation of their own youthful hopes into the persons of their children. Or perhaps they wanted their children to get all the preparation they could for the struggle that awaited them in a society where prejudice would discriminate against all but the best of the nisei.

This was the attitude of my mother's aunt and uncle. They managed to send two boys and the eldest of the girls to the state university, and the other three girls through high school. They were both getting old, and their faces were weather-roughened and their backs were bent from the years of stoop labor, but they worked in their fifteen-acre farm from morning till night, as far back as I can remember.

For neighbors my great-aunt and uncle had a poverty-stricken Japanese family that scratched out a

living from a small strip of land adjoining their farm. When the children of these neighbors were young, the rows of vegetables there used to be obscured in spots by the forests of weeds that choked the farm. My cousins and I used to make humorous comments about this pathetic piece of land that supported the farmer and his many children. We were young then, and our humor had the cruel frankness inherent in our nature. We watched the neighbors' children going to school in their broken-down Model T Ford, and we saw them growing up. As they grew older the appearance of the farm next to my great-uncle's began to improve, for the children were able to do much of the work in the field that had formerly been done by the farmer and his wife alone. The produce they sold at the market was just enough to keep the family in clothes and food and the children in school, for much of their water bill was paid by my great-uncle; and they had no horse with which to plow the field but had to borrow one from their neighbors. When the eldest son graduated from high school, my great-uncle heaved a sigh of relief that his impoverished neighbors had managed to eke out a decent education for one of their children. But to his surprise he learned that the boy was going to enter college at the end of the summer. This boy wanted to be an electrical engineer. The parents grubbed out their meager existence and sent what little money was left to their son for his university expenses, part of which he earned himself by working in a home for his board and room. Then their eldest daughter graduated from high school. And she too was sent away, to a nursing school. My great-uncle and his wife could not understand that this poverty-stricken farmer couple were driven by the same ambition that drove them themselves to send three of their children through the university, the last during the worst years of the depression. It was the same ambition that drove my mother to keep me in school when we were about to be evicted from the restaurant that was both our home and our source of livelihood.

The determination of the issei to give their children the chances denied them never swerved in the face of almost insurmountable obstacles. They suffered and they gloried in the sacrifices they made. They sweated and they slaved without thoughts of personal betterment, of good clothes, homes, cars, so long as

they had before their eyes the welfare of their children.

This was the spirit that possessed the immigrant Japanese. They lived in the hopes of their children. Some were disappointed. They could not all see their ambitions fulfilled, for not all the nisei were capable of taking advantage of the opportunities presented them, and not all had the strength of character the nature of the changing world demanded. Lastly, not all the nisei showed gratitude for the sacrifices their parents had made.

The barrier of language difference in most families kept the children apart from their parents, the cleavage growing wider and wider with the passing of years. The tendency of the issei to cling to the customs of the Japanese also provided a point of friction between them and their Americanized offspring, even when the cause of the friction bore no relation at all to these customs.

Such was the case in my family. When I was still a boy, dependent upon my parents for my food and clothing and education, I obeyed their advice without stopping to question it. But after I had finished with my schooling and gone to work earning a living for myself and the family, the changes that had been coming over me slowly but inexorably, broke out at intermittent intervals in the form of bitter protestations about the way I wanted to live my life. I couldn't see why my mother wanted to know where I went at nights, for I felt that I was old enough to take care of myself. I thought in my blinded moments of anger that it was the Japanese in her that prompted her to mind my affairs so constantly. Everything that she or my father did to irritate me was laid to their Japanese heritage, in my irrational way of thinking. I could not realize that they were merely asking questions that any mother and father would ask, no matter what their racial origin. Sometimes I concluded that they were stupid because they could not understand the conventions of American society.

It was this barrier of language that left me frustrated so often, as when I wanted to explain an intricate subject to my mother and would find myself without words to say it in a way that she would under-

stand. After such an incident I would suddenly break off and say that she wouldn't understand anyway. It was a cruel thing for me to say, yet I said this not once but many times. No, my attitude said, you are Japanese and I am American. You wouldn't understand. Skip it.

This callow attitude was one that existed commonly among the nisei. Reared in an American environment, their speech, dress, customs, ideals, all American, they had acquired with the years a certain disdain for things Japanese. And their aged parents represented all that was Japanese, all that linked the nisei themselves with their alien heritage. Sometimes a girl eloped with some one she loved rather than marry the man of her parents' choice. Sometimes a headstrong nisei broke away from his family to avoid undue parental influence. These occurrences took place in families where the parents still maintained a strong hold over their children, in accordance with the age-old custom of the Japanese family rule.

But many of the issei acquired through their children some of the ideals and customs of the country. They picked up in fragments the history of the country, and they began quoting to their own children the words of famous Americans, garnered from their readings in Japanese publications and from conversations with Americanized issei who understood to a certain extent the language and the ideals of the land.

I cannot say that they have ever lost any of the substance of their Japanese upbringing, because I have never completely understood the issei. It is commonly understood that Emperor worship is almost a religion in itself in Japan. As a child I was told by my mother that the Emperor was something like a God, and I grew up in childhood with the impression that he was in fact like a God, that he was untouchable. But I began to pick up here and there in my search for knowledge items in American papers and magazines that mentioned in a somewhat dubious vein the sacred origin of the Emperor. Still I did not question the plausibility of the legend before my parents, because it never occurred to me to do so. However, one day a few years ago, I came upon the subject while reading

the evening papers, and I broached this question to my mother: "Do you really believe that the Emperor is a God?"

She laughed at this forthright query and did not answer immediately. But I pressed her for the answer, and she said, "Oh, yes."

She smiled, like one who had long ago told a child a legendary tale and, suddenly confronted by the grown son with his accumulation of knowledge, is forced to admit her belief in the story.

I wondered then how a person in Japan would have replied to that question, and came to the single conclusion that I should have been rebuked for even thinking of the subject. But my mother had laughed and been amused, perhaps at my impertinence but more likely, I thought, at the nature of my question.

Gradually, as the issei grew older and the nisei assumed their place as the breadwinners of the family, the older generation began taking a secondary role in their business and in their home. The words of the eldest son or daughter acquired more importance, and the issei found themselves accepting more and more the ways of their children. Their homes began to take on the appearance of American homes, with decorations and furnishings arranged in the nisei taste. At the coaxing of their children they began to dress with more style, like American men and women. They listened to their children's discussion of the current books and evinced interest in the plight of the dust-bowl farmers. Through their children's open eyes they were beginning to understand for the first time the America that lay beyond the confines of their little community. They had worked hard these many years, and their grown children were pleading with them to rest. The issei were old. There remained for them but a few more years of existence.

Thus the issei were situated when the war came and shortly after, the evacuation into relocation camps. Uprooted from their homes just as they were preparing to rest for the few years that remained, they have begun the final stage of their lifetime in the New World in one-room barrack apartments huddled within a barbed-wire fence over the wastelands of the inland states.

Theirs has been a hard struggle in an unfriendly environment. They are tired and care little what happens next. A relocation camp somewhere on a wind-swept plain is as good as anywhere else to spend the next few years. For some of them the accumulated wounds of the years have left a bitterness in their hearts. Some have expressed a desire to repatriate to their old homeland, even though their American-born children should stay in this country. Even though it means that they must start life all over again at their advanced age in a land they have not seen for perhaps thirty or forty years, whose familiar landmarks will have vanished long decades ago.

For most of them, though, there is nothing to do but to remain in America after the war. They realize that they cannot expect to start all over again, working as day laborers and domestics as they once worked, back in another generation. Their only hope for the future remains with their children, the nisei.

Meanwhile the old people who are qualified for work do simple chores in the relocation camps. Those who are too old and the women who are not adapted for the work that is available spend their time keeping busy around the apartments.

Some are going to night classes, to classes in English. My own mother is learning English. Now, for the first time, she has the spare hours to learn the language of her children, the lack of understanding of which has for so long stood as a barrier between her and myself and my brother and sisters.

The first letter she had ever written to me came a few months ago, scrawled in childish English. Just a few simple sentences any beginner in English would compose. At the bottom was a postscript by my youngest sister, saying, "Mom took 4 hours to write this."

I laughed when I read this, yet I also pictured how pathetic my mother must have seemed, so earnestly attempting to learn this difficult language in her old age.

The next letter I received from her came three months later.

"Dear George," it began. "How are you? I can imagine how hard you are working. I wish I were there to help something.

"Thank you very much for the Christmas Present the rugs and candies. I like the rugs because they are just right. They match my room. I like the colors in the rugs. I am using them now because it is very cold every day.

"I am learning to read and write English first time I did not like to read and write English, because it was very hard for me. Now I know a little more English.

"Please take good care of yourself.

Affectionately,

Your Mother."

When I read this, I said to myself, "Mom has crossed the barrier." And I felt ashamed that she had been the one to do it instead of me.

Now the best years of the issei lie behind them, expended in the cultivation of the farms of California, Oregon and Washington and part of the Mountain States. From the swamps of the San Joaquin delta their labor created a fertile potato land, from the bare vineyards of Florin their labor created a rich strawberry-producing country, from the sun-baked wastes of Imperial Valley their labor created the wealthy early vegetable and melon-growing farmlands. The issei have not imprinted upon the American scene a culture in the form of the arts, because they have been too occupied with the mean struggle of making a living, but the rich vegetable-growing lands of the Pacific Coast and Mountain States verdantly remain as mute evidence of their contribution toward the enrichment of this nation.

The remaining years can lie nowhere for them but in America. For this is their home. This is their children's home. And upon their children, the nisei, rest the long-hoped-for dreams of the issei, the pioneers who came to America seeking wealth, adventure, education, and found instead sweat, a home and a Japanese-American family.