

NISEI MEMORIES OF DACHAU

Yanina Cywinska was led by the heavy-booted soldiers into an empty room. She looked around and saw blood all over the walls. She felt herself being roughly blindfolded. And she stood waiting for the gunshot that would end her life once and for all.

Was it to end here and in this way? Her family had been captured and imprisoned by the Nazi's. When she was 10 years old, she remembers everybody being told to strip, her father telling her they were all going to take a shower. They were shoved into a room - children and adults - crammed into each other. She remembers her father saying, "I'm sorry" as a white powder rather than water began coming out of the ceiling. The people panicked, adults trampling over children. Someone fell on top of her, knocking her out and inadvertently preventing her from breathing in a lethal amount of gas. A German woman charged with pulling out the dead bodies noticed that she was alive, gave her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, admonished her not to tell anyone in fear for her own life, and told her to escape in the night.

Yanina ran until she was exhausted and hid in a haystack to sleep. The prick of a pitchfork woke her with a start. A Polish farmer stood staring at her and asked her what she was doing in the haystack. She told him what she had escaped from. He took her back to his house and told his wife what had happened. His wife was afraid they might be arrested for helping this little girl and insisted they return her. So the farmer drove her back to the concentration camp.

Since she was blond and blue-eyed her life was spared. However, she subjected to torture and degradation, and forced to witness atrocities beyond human imagination when she was forced to assist the monster Dr. Mengele during his cruel and sick experiments on the Jewish prisoners. Yanina's only link to sanity was her love for ballet dancing. Each night she would go to sleep dreaming that she was the Sugar Plum Fairy in the Nutcracker Suite and as the Fairy, she would dance and leap over the barbed wire walls of the death camp.

Yanina survived six years in the Nazi death camps. Finally, on April 29, 1945 the sixteen-year-old was blindfolded and lined up against a wall to be shot. The shot never came. It was suddenly eerily silent. "We couldn't hear any heavy boot steps. Those terrible Nazi boot steps that we feared so much."

She does not remember how long she stood there before she felt someone tugging at her blindfold. She was pushed to her knees, her blindfold was removed and she found herself face to face with a Japanese man. "Oh no, now you guys won and now you are going to shoot us." The Japanese soldier shook his head. "Why don't you just shoot us and get it over with," she said again. "No, you don't understand. We are not going to kill you," he said gently. "Yes you are. Just get it over with," she said. Finally the Nisei soldier knelt down in front of her and said, "You are free. We are liberators. We are American Japanese."

These liberators, these heroic members of the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, these Japanese American Nisei, were finally publically recognized at an emotionally-charged gathering at Centenary Methodist Church in Little Tokyo on December 4th. It was standing room only and there was not a dry eye in the house.

The National Coalition for Redress/Reparations (NCRR) sponsored the event as a way to bring forward the positive contributions of Japanese Americans during WWII in order to balance out the potentially negative media coverage of the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. A cover story in the front section of the Los Angeles Times entitled "Japanese American GIs are Focus of Dachau Memories" helped create a large amount positive interest in the program.

An exhibit of historic photographs taken at Dachau by 522nd members George Oiye and Sus Ito generated even more excitement. George and Sus were both Forward Observers during the war, one of the most dangerous frontline assignments. Both are very soft spoken, extremely modest, but able to speak articulately and with quiet unquestionable authority about their experiences with the 522nd. Sus had the farthest to travel, coming to L.A. from Boston where he is a Professor Emeritus at Harvard University.

Clarence Matsumura, another 522nd veteran and now an active and vocal member of NCRR, was assigned to Headquarters and revealed a previously unknown fact. That the objective of the 522nd was to capture Hitler! He provided a moving account of his experience at Dachau and his memory of holding a dying Jewish inmate in his arms in the snow.

442nd veteran Rudy Tokiwa flew in from San Jose to be a part of the program, and to hook up with Eric Saul to go to Hawaii and then to Washington, D.C. to do further research. They plan to obtain the actual troop movements from the war department archives, irrefutable proof of the whereabouts of the 522nd on April 29, 1945 when the gates of Dachau were shot open by the Nisei soldiers. Yes, there still are doubters and refuters. They are calling the L.A. Times reporter who covered the event, and I imagine they are also calling the television news stations who covered the press conference earlier.

The program was standing room only and very ethnically mixed. A surprising number of Dachau survivors attended. The warmth and receptiveness of all who attended was so heartfelt, that there was a spontaneous movement of Dachau survivors to speak of their experiences from the podium. Another special moment came when two Black WWII medics also requested to speak. They were members of a segregated all-Black unit which was used to clean up the liberated death camps. Because the caucasian medics were disinclined to clean the death camps for fear of disease and filth, this job was relegated to the Black unit. A Jewish couple from Orange County spoke passionately of how they met on April 29, 1945 when they were liberated by the Japanese American soldiers from the death camp. They call that day the beginning of their lives.

All in all, it was a very special and historically significant event. Even Eric Saul, 442nd and Dachau historian, exclaimed, "This is the best event of this type that I have ever been to. I have never before seen or heard of so many survivors of Dachau being in the same place at the same time. This is very rare."

I believe it happened as a tribute to our Nisei 442nd and 522nd veterans. When Eric Saul, from the podium, asked all of the members of the 442nd to stand, I could feel the pride surging through all of us as we applauded them. Yes, I am damn proud of being Japanese American. And this program and the show of solidarity between two incarcerated communities empowered me even more. And none of the Asian-bashing that's going on now can change the pride and strength of our community!

GAMBARE!

(note: KPFK 90.7 fm radio taped the December 4th program. Excerpts will be broadcast on East Wind, Mondays 7:30 pm)