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TO LOSE ONE'S IDENTITY IS TO GAIN IT

After what seems a lifetime away from the West Coast during which the nation has been involved in a major war, a large police action and a prolonged cold war, I find it difficult to believe that the Kashu Mainichi is only twenty-five years old, for before the relocation period, the Kashu Mainichi seemed a rock of Gibraltar to the Japanese community of Southern California with a kind of eternal quality that indicated an existence dating back to the pioneer days of Japanese settlement in this country. Certainly its founder, the late Sei Fujii affectionately called "Uncle Fujii" by his many nisei friends, helped to shape the pattern of the pre-war Japanese community, and undoubtedly his judgment and his steadfast example in the face of adversity helped many of the undecided to choose the United States in the early days of World War II. This was the period when members of the community were uprooted by the relocation program which has since been described as "The Worst Mistake of the War". (check this quote; it's a title of an article in Harper's Mag about 1945)

But mistakes do not always lead to disaster, and this particular mistake has had many salutary effects. The lives that were lost as a result either of the war or of the relocation program are beyond reclamation; the lives damaged and the spirits wounded have not all healed. But for those of us who have had the good fortune to survive, there have been new opportunities and new hope which would probably have taken generations to attain at the rate of pre-war progress in the field of civil liberties and social justice.

For myself I have entered a profession which under the pre-war pattern would very likely have been closed to me; I met a girl more wonderful than any I knew before, who lived in pre-war days a half-continent away, and I entered into a marriage contract with her which would have been illegal under California's pre-war statutes. We have three grand children, who would probably have been outcasts in pre-war California. The social changes which have made this possible would very likely have taken place in time, but certainly not in our time without

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the crisis which we faced in common with all Americans and which accelerated this change. My case has a significance beyond a personal one simply because it is not a unique example.

From coast to coast there are men and women with Japanese names on college and university faculties who teach subjects other than Japanese history; there are men and women of Japanese derivation practicing architecture, law, medicine, dentistry with clients who are not Japanese. There are secretaries, scientists, factory workers, farm hands, accountants, journalists of Japanese descent working for people who would never have dreamed of hiring them in pre-war days. There are people a generation or two away from Japan who own businesses, farms, homes in towns they never heard of before the war and in cities that seemed a world away.

For the Japanese-American living in Southern California, the old world was bordered on the west by the ocean, in the north by the San Fernando Valley, in the ~~west~~ east by the desert and in the south by San Diego and Imperial Valley. For some it was even more confined: the length of First Street from Alameda to Los Angeles. A similar pattern existed in each of the Japanese communities on the West Coast. The forcible breakdown of this insularity has been more beneficial than not. Not only have Japanese-Americans been awakened to the possibilities of a future in other sections of the country, but those who have chosen to return to the West Coast have also developed an awareness that the old insularity was a stultifying thing.

The West Coast communities have changed. From a maturing intelligence as much as from chagrin at the injustices they perpetrated during war-time panic and an eagerness to make restitution, the states along the Pacific have gained new insights into their relationship with citizens of all minority groups, and returnees have found opportunities that never existed before -- as for example in the teaching profession, a lesser degree of segregated housing, the abolition of

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discriminatory legislation aimed to stay the "yellow peril", a phrase probably meaningless to sanseis, which ~~was~~ <sup>is</sup> fact is <sup>is</sup> probably a sign of the social progress made.

The break-up of the ghetto-like Japanese groups that existed before the war and the dispersion of what had been a rather concentrated Japanese population have had other results too. Possibly the most important is the evaporation of the myth that there is a "Japanese mind" or a "Nisei bloc". I recall a grammar school teacher telling me, "I'm disappointed in you; I thought all Japanese children were well-behaved." I resented this and yet felt a certain obligation to fit the ~~makkezo~~ stereotype. I hope that our children will be well-behaved, but if they are it will probably not be regarded by their teachers as a racial characteristic. While a great deal may be said for solidarity, it is probably a healthy thing that Japanese-Americans no longer feel the need or obligation to fit a stereotype. In losing identity with a racial group, the Japanese-American has been enabled to gain a personal <sup>identity</sup> which equips him better to serve the community as a whole.

This necessarily means a rejection of the old narrow view of concern only with problems peculiar to the Japanese community in America. For the one lesson that we should have learned since the outbreak of the war is that our chief concern must be for all people. The social changes that have given Americans of Japanese descent status in the American culture have been due to the fact that others have felt the responsibility of making these changes possible.

It is twenty years since I began my three-year tenure at the Kashi Mainichi. The three years there were wonderful, the puerility of the material I turned out notwithstanding, and I would not exchange that experience for anything. Since then, each time I go into a printing plant or a newspaper office, I feel an authentic nostalgia. But I feel no longing for "the good old days" -- though good they were in their own way. In spite of atomic bombs, guided missiles and strontium 90, these days are better.