

A Myopic Account  
of a Relocated Life  
during the Second  
World War

Personal Recollections of life in an  
Assembly Center and Relocation  
Camp for Japanese Descendants  
and various digressions.



**Ishikawa**

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**Da:** "Ishikawa" <ishikawa@easyasp.it>  
**A:** "Ishikawa" <ishikawa@easyasp.it>  
**Data invio:** lunedì 17 marzo 2003 14.34  
**Oggetto:** Fw: wwII

----- Original Message -----

**From:** Ishikawa  
**To:** Ishikawa  
**Sent:** Sunday, March 16, 2003 3:56 PM  
**Subject:** Fw: wwII

----- Original Message -----

**From:** Ishikawa  
**To:** beth\_j@mail.com  
**Cc:** Ishikawa Jesse Steven Ishikawa  
**Sent:** Friday, March 14, 2003 7:33 PM  
**Subject:** wwII

Beth was assigned to do an oral interview with a family member about WWII and sent questions to me. As you know, I was on the sidelines, but answered as best I could and thought I would share the info with the families of our five children. I am sure that Beth does not mind. I have edited the originals sent her and made slight additions.

Dear Beth. I'll do my best to answer your questions in the order you put them although you may find that you'll want to reorganize the whole thing. Before tackling your questions, I'll preface the project with a few comments. First, I was on the sidelines and not in the war, and you may want to interview your grandpa Kaine for another perspective. It was not my choice to stay out; the day of Pearl Harbor your late Granduncle Johnny and I went to the armory in Exposition Park in Los Angeles to volunteer. We approached through a wooded area and heard, "Halt, who goes there?" Not wanting to be shot (there had been rumors that Japanese had landed in California,) I didn't give my name but answered, "Friends." and was told to advance and be recognized which we did, telling the guard that we wanted to enlist. So he directed us to the recruiting office where we filled questionnaire and were politely told that they would call us. They didn't and subsequently we learned that nisei who had been drafted were being given honorable discharges. essentially being purged from the army. As far as I know, the navy never let nisei in,

Later when they were organizing the 442nd (the most highly decorated unit in the war), Johnny, who was still in a relocation camp was planning to join and may have signed up, I wrote to him and to some friends I knew in camps not to join since it was a segregated unit. This was an act of sedition, and I suppose I could have been imprisoned for it. Still later when I was in Lincoln in graduate school and working at the museum, I was drafted and went to Fort Leavenworth, being sent off by friends after a party with a nice valise and other gifts. This was when the allies were sweeping through France, and 90% of us were turned down. I was told that I wasn't accepted because I needed glasses. The clerk who told me this was wearing glasses with very thick lenses which I pointed out, arguing that if my glasses were to be shot off, I would probably lose my head too. "Don't tell me about it" he grumped, and I had the feeling that he would

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gladly have traded places with me. The following week the Allies were in trouble at the Battle of the Bulge and that batch of draftees were almost all accepted including someone I know with a handicap. Since several people had chipped in to buy the gifts, I couldn't give them back. Your <sup>great</sup> Uncle Hank had been drafted some time before and was in a regular unit. As a matter of fact, because he had accounting skills, they wanted to send him to officer's candidate school, but having a family he didn't want to commit himself for a long period.

That was a longer preface than I intended.

1. **What was your job situation during WWII?** I was a senior at UCLA when war broke out, Five months later we had to go to what they called an assembly center in California while relocation camps were being prepared away from the West Coast. More about this in question 5. When I went to Lincoln for graduate school, I had to have a job, and a friend steered me to the Art Museum where I did grunt work, unpacking and packing works of art, building crates, hanging pictures, etc. After awhile they trusted me to arrange objects for exhibitions. Then since I could write, they had me do research and write explanatory labels longer than I thought necessary which is essentially where I got my art education. After a couple of years when the art librarian left, I was given her job which was a staff appointment and not just part time work and this added to my education too since the art historians had me digging up stuff for them too. A good way to learn, but wouldn't be acceptable generally. Oh yes, since the job as librarian didn't pay much (U of Nebraska salaries were still at depression era levels) in summer, I had various other part-time jobs, sometimes simulataneously, dishwasher, short order cook, icing refrigerator cars. The last paid .50 an hour, .55 at night, the others .35 an hour. I occasionally babysat for nothing. In the summer of 1944 I went to New York for the College Summer Service Group about 15 students from all over who did social work and met with scholars in the social services, ministers, politicians, etc. The following summer, I resigned from my job at the university and went to New York with the intention of becoming a writer. I was there for seven months doing more or less volunteer work for the Post War World Council, an organization of Norman Thomas who had a lofe-long influence on me. I did some writing for it and other liberal organizations, but then Dwight Kirsch, director of the Nebraska art museum came to New York to organize the big annual May Show and asked me to come back, offering me the job as curator and an academic appointment Sometime later I realized that this was work that would not have been available to nisei before the war. (Nisei PhDs often found jobs only as clerks in fruit stands.)

2. **Did you know anyone fighting in the war?** I had college friends who lost their lives at Pearl Harbor and Corregidor and a couple were killed in airplane crashes during trainting. Later, at Nebraska, most of my friends went to war, most importantly my best friend, CD Mastin, who was in Normandy on D-Day plus 1 or 2, who got shrapnel shortly thereafter and was sent home where he reënrolled in school and introduced me to your grandmother, Almost all of my close friends were in action but came back alive. Later I found that several men I had known before the war in California had lost their lives.

3. **What were your views on communism, socialism and other forms of government:** When I went to New York I met Norman Thomas, the most ethical and moral person in public life. A year later I went back to New York and worked with him. Familiarity only strengthened my



regard for him, and I became a Socialist. The Communists and Trotskyites (both factions) hated Socialists more than they did the Republicans which is the reason that the left will never get anywhere. I think that socialism is closer to the American ideal of freedom, liberty and respect for all people than any other political principle, but I grant that there have been renegade Socialists too such as Craxi in Italy who had to flee the country because of corruption charges. Once at a party in NY I was asked how I came to be a socialist. Even though I was at odds with organized religion I replied that it was because I was a Christian. Laughter erupted and I realized that almost all the others were Jews. During the McCarthy years when the University of Nebraska was going to require a "Loyalty Oath," I said that if there were communists on the faculty, they would have no trouble lying and signing it, but that it would be truer to the ideals of the nation not to require a loyalty oath and I would not sign. It never came to a test since we moved to Des Moines. Basically I think that the moral fiber of people in politics is more important than party affiliation if they can be free of party pressure. I've known people of honor in both parties that I respect, Unfortunately the profession rarely attracts the best people.

4. How much did you know about what was going on overseas? I was aware of what was being written in newspapers and magazines, what was being heard on the radio. I figured some of it was being manipulated and that sometimes we weren't getting all of the facts, but didn't know that anything could be done about that.

5. What was life like in the Japanese concentration camps?: You mean American, not Japanese.

~~Had~~

I stayed in Japan, I would have been in a Japanese one, worse. More importantly, if they were to be called "concentration camps" you have to create a more horrifying word for what the Nazis had in Germany and Poland. Our camps were unjust and should not have existed. There were prison camps at Missoula, Montana, for people suspected of working for the Japanese and one at Tule Lake, California, for people who wanted to go back to Japan.. The California location was ironic since the idea was to remove Japanese and descendants off the West Coast. The one relocation camp in California was Manzanar, naturally secure with Mt Whitney on the West and impenetrable desert in all other directions. My ex-boss, publisher of the Kashu Mainichi, was at Missoula, but I don't think he was a Japanese sympathizer. He helped many immigrants and published a Japanese language paper, but he never interfered with anything I wrote critical of Japan and once in the dark ages when I believed in free enterprise and wrote an anti-union article, he protected me from goons who came to beat me up even though he disagreed with me. Also, I believe that Charlie Chaplin's butler was sent there. The butler's son was at UCLA with me, and he laughed that the day of Pearl Harbor and after, FBI agents were at his house playing both sides of every phonograph record in the house looking for coded messages. So there may have been innocent or at least not dangerous people there too, and as far as I know, no trials. Your great-aunt Chiyo's brother-in-law was at <sup>the</sup> Tule Lake because he was bitter and wanted to go to Japan. I don't think he made it, but his son was drafted and terribly wounded in the war.



**Ishikawa**

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Da: "Ishikawa" <ishikawa@easyasp.it>  
 A: "Ishikawa" <ishikawa@easyasp.it>  
 Data invio: martedì 18 marzo 2003 12.08  
 Oggetto: Fw: more wwii

----- Original Message -----

From: [Ishikawa](#)  
 To: [Ishikawa](#)  
 Sent: Monday, March 17, 2003 2:35 PM  
 Subject: Fw: more wwii

----- Original Message -----

From: [Ishikawa](#)  
 To: [beth\\_i@mail.com](#)  
 Cc: [Ishikawa](#) [Jesse](#) [Steven Ishikawa](#)  
 Sent: Saturday, March 15, 2003 3:02 PM  
 Subject: more wwii

I digress because I wanted to point out that if they had the suspects in prison camps who were believed to be potentially a threat why were the relocation centers needed? But the fact is they were there, and I suppose that they varied depending on the individual camp director. They tried to be as humane as possible: Families were kept intact, At the assembly center at the Santa Anita race track, the early arrivals lived in the stables for race horses while we got a room about 30x15 (might have been bigger) in a barracks that had five or six such units with a pot-bellied stove in the middle. I think that large families had to share the same space. A mess hall served the whole camp and there was a barrack (probably more than one) with showers and toilets. Work was available but not mandatory: professionals such as MD's earned \$16 per month, semi-professionals earned \$12, the rest earned \$8 which I got as a postal worker which I asked for having worked in the LA PO during the Christmas rush after Pearl Harbor. I had been asked to edit the camp newspaper for \$12 but declined not wanting to do anything mental. I believe that wages went up \$4 at the relocation centers. There was a shop where we could spend this (script, not cash) for candy, toothpaste, etc. Schools were set up, and meals were available at a mess hall. A recreation center was set up. Uncle Johnny was a recreation director at Santa Anita and received \$12 a month. I took piano lessons from a professional teacher who also earned \$12 a month. I wrestled a couple of times where the coach had been a pro, but except for one other kid, who had wrestled in high school and with a club no one with any aptitude turned up so we all got bored and that ended, but I did play baseball where my great batting average nose-dived after we started playing softball where my batting was hot even after I got cracked on the ankle by a batter, I learned chess moves but not the subtleties. In short, it was the welfare state gone wrong.

I wrote sporadically to friends, and the only visitor I had was a teammate who brought me my letter sweater. My best friend from Jr High days wrote to say that he didn't know what side I was on but that we would always be friends, and I cut him off. 45 years later when I found his address through mutual friends and wrote him, he said that as soon as he had sent the letter, he knew I would be hurt and apologized. Despite the fact that we always planned to get together, we never did before he died. Two thirds of a continent was a greater distance then. Because I

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was in a blue funk most of the time except when playing ball, most of my mental activity was in writing letters to University graduate programs and the War Relocation Authority trying to get out of camp.

After six months at Santa Anita, we were herded onto trains and taken slowly (4 days three nights) to Amache in the eastern desert of Colorado where barracks had been constructed in the cactus and sagebrush where rattlesnakes probably outnumbered the people. However, I think people bothered the snakes more than vice-versa because the snakes stayed out of the cleared area whereas some people would go out into the sage brush (the barbed wire perimeter was much greater than at Santa Anita) to kill snakes and collect rattles. At Amache Johnny and I elected to work in the kitchen since we learned that's where the food was. We thought food was great at Amache compared to Santa Anita, but people who had come from the Tulare Assembly Center said that it was not as good as they had at Tulare, and later we heard that the director of Santa Anita had been arrested for stealing the camp's meat and selling it on the black market. That is why we had had almost a steady diet of heart. Before leaving Santa Anita I had noted that a lot of people had been leaving to go to school, and I had heard nothing. It occurred to me that the reason might be that my having been in Japan so recently might have worked against me. So I wrote to the War Relocation Authority asking if this were the case and that if it were, they should know that while I was in Japan I had been in trouble because of the article I had been asked to write for the English language magazine *Japan and America* where among other things I had criticized Japan's presence in China (Japan had invaded but didn't call it a war; it was referred to as the China Incident). I don't know if that was the problem, but three weeks after arriving at Amache I got my release to go to the University of Nebraska. It was just as well that the release waited until we were in Colorado because I had to pay my own transportation and Colorado was a lot closer than California. One other thing about Amache is that the people from Tulare who arrived before we did had petitioned not to let us come to Amache because there had been a riot at Santa Anita. The reason for the riot was that police had searched all the rooms in the barracks and stables and later some people had found that watches, rings, jewelry had been stolen. The police had been accompanied by a man that rumor said was a Korean put in the camp to spy. Hence, the man was attacked and saved from serious injury only by huddling in a corner where he was more or less protected from the only weapon used against him, a typewriter with which they tried to crown him.

The foregoing is a personal account and probably not useful to you. Let me recall some of the things I learned from other people. Jitsuo, your great-aunt Chiyo's husband, was relieved and glad to be going to the safety of camp. His work as an interior decorator had declined, he thought because of the war, but my guess in looking back is that his more or less art deco style with emphasis on cake decorations and paintings on walls, ceilings and doors had gone out of fashion. But maybe because he was Japanese rather than a nisei, he felt threatened by being an "enemy alien" outside with Chiyo and the three children.

A friend who had worked on the newspaper with me commented that she was standing in line waiting to get into the mess hall for dinner when she overheard a woman saying to another in Japanese. "Isn't it wonderful being able to eat in the dining room leisurely, food that you didn't have to cook off of dishes that you didn't have to wash" (never mind that they were metal and not china). She might have been someone who had gone to the US as a picture bride and had to



serve as a slave to her husband and family. She was free of the problem of shopping, etc.

Although they lived in family units with parents not going out to traditional jobs, children might have felt freer of parental supervision and they had a lot of friends. Johnny had a lot of friends there, I had socialized less in the Japanese community even though I worked for a Japanese newspaper and played basketball and softball with a team in a nisei league and went to my parents' Japanese church after Junior High, I had relatively few friends, and no one other than my dad and Johnny saw me off when I went. I did go to one of the dances Johnny organized at Santa Anita, but that and playing ball were the extent of my socializing. At Santa Anita, my only close friend was Bob Hirano, and he didn't go to Colorado with us.

I think that many people in the camps felt that it was necessary and the Japanese American Citizen's League even had little tin clip-ons made that read, "We also serve" which I never wore. The sense of injustice and anger about the camps developed after the war when nisei were asked by community groups to discuss the experience. Several were asked to discuss the camps at a class at MSU, and when I tried to give an objective account, I was called a banana (yellow outside, white inside--variation on the Oreo cookie.) I retorted that I had received a racial epithet twice, once in Japan when I was jeered at "Yonkee boy" and just then when I was called a banana. But it was about that time that some nisei started using their Japanese names, etc. Also joined the bandwagon on affirmative action with women, latinos and other Asians and stopped the momentum for progress that Blacks had been making.

Finally, it should be noted that before the notices were put up that we were to be ready to go to the Assembly Center on such and such a date, it was possible to leave California independently as long as you settled outside of the Pacific Coast states, and some went to farms in the Mountain States or elsewhere.

6. Did you face any material losses, or were you deprived of any certain foods because of the war?: We had relatively little to lose in the way of material goods. Some things we stored in Chiyo and Jitsuo's garage, The only prohibited thing I had was a camera which I gave to a friend. Some people lost a lot, A student I met at Nebraska said that his dad had a big farm which was essentially stolen by a man to whom he had given power of attorney, but others had done the same thing with more reliable people. My brother-in-law Zaima had a stall at Grand Central Market, a lucrative commodity at the time, and did not recover it. His membership in the National Geographic Society was cancelled. Food may have been easier for us in camp since we didn't have to fool with food stamps although when the camp manager at Santa Anita stole our food the quality was somewhat lacking.

7. What was the war effort like at home?: I think there was very good support of the war. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor there was an America First movement started by Sen Burton K Wheeler (I think), who wanted to keep the US out of the European war even to the point of not sending aid to Britain, but that largely dissipated after the December 7 attack. On the other hand, the week following the attack I was in the Moby Dick Bookstore browsing in the stacks when a man approached me and said with an heavy accent, "Ve Chermans musst stick togedder." Needless to say, I got out of there, but perhaps I should have reported it to someone. It wasn't necessary, however; a few weeks later the bookstore was raided as a front for the German-American Bund activity. In the camp there may have been Japanese sympathizers, but I



think people there generally backed America. As far as aiding the war effort, obviously we could not work in war industries and with no income, buying bonds must have been difficult.

8. What would be a typical day for you during this time period?: Impossible to state since it covers many situations over some years: camp, university, work.

9. What was your average meal?: As today, there was no such thing as an average meal. In Nebraska I missed fresh fruit and vegetables, but I never felt deprived.

10: Name a few words that described your feelings for WWII: I was depressed to think that we could be shunted off to camp, separated from the mainstream. My father felt it was unjust but accepted the fact. I was grateful that my mother had not lived to see the evacuation as she would have been deeply disappointed. As a whole, I think that the country was together in a way that it wasn't before or has been since. Most people thought it was necessary. Some of the people who fought said they had never felt more alive -- even with death all around them.

11: What was the number one way you were affected by the war: Relocation. That's the one word but it covers a lot. It showed me more of the country, found the one woman in the world for me, found a vocation that I would not have had in my pre-war life, saved the world from some bad novels had anyone published them.

12: How did America in general feel about the war?: See 10

13: When you were released from the camp what did you receive? Did the government apologize?: No cups, no trophies, no certificate, no gold star, not even a hand-shake except embraces from my dad and Johnny. The government apologized in 1988 and eventually sent checks of \$20,000 to everyone still alive who had been in one of the camps, probably not Missoula nor Tule Lake. A price can't be put on a compensation like this. for the deprivation of civil liberties. Was it too small? too large? What about Blacks deprived of their civil rights through most of American history? *What about American Indians?*

14: Did your economic situation change at all because of the war?: Everybody's did except possibly some hermit in the hills who didn't know there had been a war.

15. Do you feel that President Roosevelt did a good job in leading our country in WWII?: Roosevelt was a genius. He saw the war coming despite a lot of resistance to it by people like Wheeler and by the Oxford Movement which genuinely thought peace was the only way and appeasers who were timid, etc. With what was happening in Europe, he knew it was only a matter of time before the US would be involved. Since we were not prepared for it, he started rearming which in turn helped to lick the Great Depression. He picked good men to run the military, worked with allies. He did less well preparing for the peace, selling out to Stalin at Yalta and setting the stage for Truman to do the same at Potsdam.

16: What Year do you feel WWII started Affecting you personally?: I was not political pre-war although many of my friends at UCLA were. I would often eat my sack lunch with loudly arguing refugees from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and US intellectuals. So I was aware of what was happening in Europe, knew that Poland and Czechoslovakia had been victimized,



surprised at France's quick collapse which meant also Holland and Belgium, but I thought England's grit might carry them at least to a stalemate. There were peace demonstrations at UCLA, but I wasn't much involved with anything political. I had thought that Japan might make a move in Southeast Asia particularly since when I was in Japan I thought the Japanese navy was getting antsy because only the army was involved in China. I had no idea that Japan would attack the US. I suppose it wasn't until after Pearl Harbor that I felt the war was involving us, not initially in fear that I would suffer because of my face as Jitsuo did, but because we began to be limited. First, we were not able to travel more than 50 miles which meant that I couldn't go to the conference tournament in Berkeley although my coach tried to get permission, then even the UCLA campus was put off limits. It's just as well because I had to sell my car after which a 20 minute drive became an hour and a half bus commute. Fortunately I was permitted to take my comprehensive examination without which I would not have been permitted to graduate. Some people had to take it five times before passing. I was lucky to do it the first time.

17 What were your biggest fears before/during/after the war?: Would I pass with decent grades?(they were not, only gentlemanly?/ Could England hold off?/Will Liv marry me?/Can we make ends meet.

18. What were your feelings on Pearl Harbor?: I thought Japan was insane to attack Pearl Harbor and it must have felt misgivings as they began the attack. That it succeeded beyond their expectations was because our ships had not been deployed. I worried about the people at Pearl. The fact that the war took so long give some measure of our unreadiness despite Roosevelt's planning. The attack seemed particularly heinous because there were Japanese diplomats in Washington trying to iron our differences between the US and Japan.

19. In general was the time during the war a good time?: For me things turned out well, finding your Nonna, etc., but I would say it is NEVER a good time during a war.. WWII was thrust on us, and we had no choice, but war brutalizes people, individual rights are trampled in the name of national emergency, greed is encouraged among people who profit by it, arms manufacturers and other industrial entrepreneurs, it creates a set of artificial values in the necessity of creating heroes, some authentic, some phony, it stifles questioning of national values and objectives. Xenophobia, chauvinism, jingoism overwhelm reason.

20. Did you or your family take special precautions?: Question is moot for our family at that time; the only thing I can think of is that my dad wouldn't let me go skiing in the mountains. A pity since I wouldn't have turned out to be such a klutz on the slopes.

AFTERWORD: The cost in human lives is never compensated for, but in the aftermath of every war, change seems to accelerate. So after WWII among the Japanese-American population, there were many more economic opportunities, not just dead-end work in fruit stands. Issei who had been deprived of citizenship (the exception had been veterans of WWI) were able to become citizens. This was true for other Asian groups as well.

At the first announcement that the relocation camps were to be established, many people felt it unjust, but the only ones who raised official protest were the Friends (Quakers), Jews (B'nai



Brith Anti-Defamation League,) Blacks (National Association for rhe Advancement of Colored People.) The mealy-mouthed Japanese American Citizens League which purported to speak for every Japanese-American said, of course we'll go willingly and made those stuped "We also serve" clips. I had never been a member of JACL even when I worked at the Kashu Mainichi and never had a good opinion of it and thought it was particularly hypocritical of the organization to work so hard for Redress after meekly agreeing to Relocation without putting up at least a token protest.