

## FROM INTERNMENT TO GOING OFF TO WAR

1942-1943

If you have been shown my *Reminiscences* and *More Reminiscences* and the volumes entitled *Miscellaneous Papers* you will find in them some of my experiences as a young man in the World War II period. They were not happy times, and for a very long time, I would not talk about the experiences even to your fathers. Some people who know about this type of reluctance speak of it as *social amnesia*. It was much later in life, in my retired years, that I thought I should write those experiences down for your parents. What I am writing here is a sort of a synopsis for you of the events in my life leading up to my internment and on, until I went off to join the U.S. Army, eventually to fight in the war in the Europe.

I was 17 years of age and a senior at the Lincoln High School in Portland, Oregon when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred on 7 December 1941. I was a good student, had done well in gymnastics and been active in the student government. At my graduation, which I was not permitted to attend, I was given the T.T. Davis Award for being the top student of the 1942 graduating class. I had lettered in gymnastics, and I was the student body Treasurer in my senior year. Further, I had been inducted into the Hi-Y, considered in our school to be the top honorary organization for boys in high school. I thought I was secure as a high school student, but with the attack on Pearl Harbor, my secure world had burst.

Series of unexpected things happened soon after that date. Although the nisei (means *second generation*) is an American citizen by birth, many unthinking people in the country thought of us as being enemies. After all, we looked like the people of Japan. However, those who knew me well - my classmates, my teachers, and people for whom and with whom I worked, held no such negative thoughts. First, there was an order requiring us (all people of Japanese ancestry) to register with the police and have our fingerprints taken. Then we were told to have the short-wave band of our radio made inoperative. A curfew was imposed on us. We had to be home from 8:00 pm to 6:00 am the following morning. We were not permitted to go more than 5 miles from our respective homes. You can imagine what a cramp this had on my activities. There could be no parties nor attendance at school dances. In my senior year, I worked on holiday weekends at one of the shops of Flowers Tommy Luke. Young Tommy Luke was my classmate and close friend, and it was for his father that I worked. The days leading up to Christmas, Easter, and Mothers' Day were very special time for the flower shop. Tommy Luke, Sr. was a short, rotund and jovial Irishman. In those days that I worked in the shop late into the evening beyond 8:00 pm, he would take me in his car to his own home in the West Hills of Portland and put me up in the guest room. He was in effect an accomplice to my not obeying the curfew. The Hi-Y meetings were held at the YMCA starting at 7:00 pm, and it often went beyond 8:00 pm. I would often stay to about 15 minutes before 8:00 pm and then excuse myself and literally run home. I guess I really got my exercise then. The restrictions were hard for me to take, but later I realized how much of a financial burden it was for truck farmers who had been bringing their produces to the early market. Businesses were also greatly restricted. What occasioned these restrictions? Historians

today say it was simply hysteria.

I remember soon after December we saw signs in Chinese-owned stores that read *This is a Chinese Store* in bold print. A local funeral parlor put up a sign *We Welcome Japanese Business*. To us it was not funny. There were other unwritten and unstated messages, e.g. one day I was going down to the bank doing my work as the student body Treasurer. [In my days the student body treasurer collected student body dues and handled the income from the concessions.] A workman coming toward me from the opposite direction bore down on me and pushed me off the side-walk. There was nothing I could do. Some people who saw this incident just shook their heads, but didn't say or do anything. The world outside my circle suddenly became hostile.

In May 1942, six weeks before I was to graduate from high school, all the people of Japanese ancestry were ordered by the War Department (as it was called then), under the Executive Order 9066 issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to report with only what we could carry on our person to the Assembly Center. That essentially meant two suitcases for each of us. Can you imagine what you would put into two suitcases? And remember we had to carry them. I had clothes, toilet articles, important papers and books and papers. (In our days, we bought our own school books.) I still had studies to do to finish my high school courses, then by correspondence. Books are heavy and that restricted a whole lot of things I would like to have taken.

Our Assembly Center was the Pacific Northwest Livestock Exposition building and grounds in North Portland. The building had a large dining facility, kitchen and an assembly area. The stalls and holding pens for animals were quickly covered over with plywood to be the floors, and plywood partitions were erected to make semi-confined spaces for families. The supports for the plywood floor were not close enough that there was a bounce when we walked across the floor. There were no doors. What were supplied were cloth curtains. The partitions were one plywood length high, i.e. 8 feet. Since the roof was very high, we could hear the cacophony of snoring. There was little privacy. We had shared bathroom facilities, one for males and another for females. The Assembly Center was administered by a new government agency called the War Relocation Authority. Its first director was Dr. Milton Eisenhower, who later became the President of the Johns Hopkins University. I saw him several times at the University in our later years, but we never talked about his time as the director of WRA. The staff of WRA came from the WPA. Those who chose to work were assigned various jobs. I was the head of the pantry. It was not a very demanding job, but it kept me busy and being busy was important. We dispensed bread, butter, salt and pepper, mustard, ketchup and fruits.

On 2 January 1942 I became 18, and I was to have registered for the draft. The draft board, however, was totally undecided what to do with the nisei, and so did nothing until we had gone to the Assembly Center. It may seem funny registering for the draft when we had been incarcerated.

As I said I could not attend my graduation exercise and receive my diploma and the T.T. David Award certificate and check. I could years later understand why I was not permitted, for if the WRA had allowed me to attend as an exception, it would have had to make exceptions for many others just as deserving. What was ironic was that I was

permitted to leave the Assembly Center four times in a WRA-supplied vehicle with driver. The officials wanted the young people to be active. Sports were organized and playing fields were laid out. They also encouraged dances to be held. Some persons remembered that I had worked for Flower Tommy Luke, and they asked me to contact Tommy Luke, Sr. and find out whether he would lend us potted palms for decorations. I called, and Mr. Luke said he would be glad to lend us the palms without any charge because I had asked. With that arranged, I went into Portland with a truck and driver and picked up the palms. You need to know that the Assembly Center was bounded on all sides with a barbed-wire fence and soldiers stood guard at the gate and watched us from the towers. It was a good feeling to be driven out of the Center past the guards. Two days later I left the Center again to return the palms. This happened twice. At the time I was hurt that getting the palms for decoration for dance was more important than letting me attend the T.T. Davis Award ceremony.

We had no air-conditioning, and the summer heat was stifling, and there were many rumors about what the government was going to do with us. Finally as September was approaching we were informed that we are being sent by train to the Minidoka WRA Camp in Idaho. That was an euphemism (good sounding expression). It was a place in the Idaho desert in which block after block of tar-papered buildings had been constructed. Each block had rows of barracks, a dining room, laundry facilities and a common bathroom and showers, one for men and another for women. The barracks were divided into several rooms. Each family was assigned a room. Every room was supplied with iron cots and a black iron pot-bellied stove in which to burn coal. A real problem was dust which blew into the rooms. The barracks had been built with green lumber so that when they dried out in the desert air, big gaps developed in the walls, wide enough that we could see stars at night. We filled mattress ticking with straw and slept on it. Pity the people who were allergic to straw! The entire camp was fenced in with barbed-wire. Prominent in the fence were guard towers. The WRA officials told us they were protecting us from outsiders. The soldiers guarding us were, however, not told that. They pointed the machine-guns in to the camp. The desert was a very unfriendly place. When the sun sets, the temperature plummets, even in the summer. In the winter it was bitterly cold.

Because of my academic achievements I had two small cash scholarships, and so in February 1943, I left the camp (with permission, of course) and enrolled at the University of Idaho, Southern Branch (today it is the Idaho State University) in Pocatello. I was there for one semester. While there I took an examination for the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) and passed it with good marks. Under this program the qualifying soldier would be sent to college, after which he was to become an officer. During the semester I made a decision to volunteer into the U.S. Army and wrote to my draft board in Portland, Oregon. The War Department had second thoughts after having evacuated the American citizens of Japanese ancestry and decided that we could serve if we volunteered. At the time it would not draft us.

After the semester was over, not wanting to go back into the camp, I went to Wieser, Idaho and worked as a farm laborer, picking peas, green beans, and other vegetable produces. Jobs were not difficult to get because there was a great shortage of farm laborers. While I was there a letter came from my draft board ordering me to report for induction at the induction center in Portland, Oregon. I was caught somewhat in

a dilemma. It was not legal for me to be in exclusion area, but at the same time I had a legal order to go to Portland. So, I said, "What the heck!" and bought a train ticket to Portland without any problem, traveled overnight and arrived in Portland in time to report to the induction center early in the morning. There were quite a number of would-be soldiers waiting for their names to be called for processing. Close to noon, I found I was the only person not called. A staff person came over and asked my name. He checked and saw that my name was not on the roster. He said I should go to my draft board and check, and this I did.

When I reached the draft board, the clerk asked if she could help me. I said, "I guess so. I was ordered to report to the induction center today and when I got there my name was not on the roster. Here is my order which came from this draft board."

I must have caused a panic button to go off. "Oh my goodness," she said, "You weren't meant to report here in Portland."

"But the order says explicitly to report to Portland, Oregon," I said. "And I spent good money to come overnight from Wieser, Idaho."

"I'm sorry. There has been a mistake. Wait a minute and we'll straighten this out." She disappeared to some office in the back.

After some time had elapsed, the clerk came back with a new order for me to report to the induction center in Salt Lake City. She had also in her hand a Pullman (a railway sleeper car) ticket for me to go from Portland, Oregon to Salt Lake City. For the ordinary person without travel order in those days to obtain a train ticket in coach was difficult enough. It was impossible to obtain a Pullman berth. I had some super priority to be given the Pullman ticket and reservation to leave that evening! She also said that she had made arrangement for an Army vehicle to meet me at the Salt Lake City station to take me to the induction center. She informed me all this and then said, "The train doesn't leave until evening. You can sit in the office here until time to go to the station." Was she afraid I might vanish or be arrested for being in the exclusion area? There was something like six hours from then to train's departure time. "No thanks," I said. "I'll just go around Portland and may be see some friends." She knew very well that it was not legal for me to be in Portland, and it was their mistake to have called me there. She was worried, but there was little she could do. Her parting words were, "You'll be on that train, won't you? We don't want you to miss it."

"Of course, I will be on the train!" I said and left the draft board office.

I went to the Union Station in plenty of time, boarded the train, and claimed my berth. At Salt Lake City, I was met by an Army corporal who picked me up and delivered me to the induction center. I basked in the VIP treatment accorded to me by my draft board. I was inducted at Fort Douglas, Utah on 10 August 1943.