

Peggy Misao Mitchell.  
EVACUATION

SEA/M-2  
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Inasmuch as the time has arrived for those of us, who were forcefully evacuated during the World War II, to speak up, I shall convey my information to the best of my recollections. I feel that this was one of the gravest mistakes that our government had committed, probably instigated by a few hysterical and prejudiced politicians, and which proved to be not only very costly, but unjustified.

First of all, without even investigating thousands of peaceful citizens (a lot of them rightful U. S. citizens by birth), the government decided to usurp them from their homes and businesses and corralled them out in the wasteland, miles away from nowhere. Most of them were law-abiding, self-supporting, contributing members of their communities and their only misfortune was that they were of the same race as the enemy country, Japan, either by blood or marriage.

My husband and his family had a thriving, prosperous grocery store on Beacon Avenue in Seattle (Beacon Hill Shurfine Grocery) with sales increasing by leaps and bounds due to the war. When we received the harsh notice from the government to vacate Seattle by Feb. 20, 1942, not only our entire family, but all our Japanese friends were panicky. Naturally we expected our parents (who were still aliens) to be under suspicion, but not any of the U. S. citizens. My brother-in-law had even considered volunteering for the army to help his country. It was like "a slap in the face". All of us were in despair wondering what we're going to do, what kind of a future was in store for us. Mainly, what are we going to do with our business, furnitures, our personal belongings, cars, our valuables? We had a deadline of about a month's time. We were told we were allowed only a duffle bag, a suitcase and whatever else we could just carry. To lose everything a person had taken years to acquire was really heartbreaking, but what could we do! Orders were orders and we were compelled to obey. Luckily my husband was able to sell his grocery store and the truck to a competing store across from us just in the nick of time. I heard that many of our friends were not so fortunate and they had to abandon or leave their business. The people, who knew about the situation, certainly took advantage and grabbed everything they could get their hands on. As in the case of my father, he owned a candy store (Koyeido Candy Store on 514 Maynard Avenue in Seattle) and being alone, he had no ways or means in such a short time to make arrangements so he just left everything, a lot of personal belongings with sentimental values. Once all these people were self-sufficient, hardworking people with a little bit of wealth and possessions accumulated through years of toil and suddenly they became homeless refugees with a bleak and desolate outlook. Such injustice! I will never forget that feeling of utter indignation in thinking that United States had turned against us.

PUYALLUP ASSEMBLY CENTER

On that dreary, rainy morning (Feb. 19, 1942) we had to congregate to a certain designated area (ours was on Beacon Hill near the Jefferson Park Golf Course) to board a guarded bus that was to take us to a temporary quarters at the Puyallup Fair grounds. The personnel, who were herding us into the buses, were very hostile in their attitude and treated us like "dirt". The old and the aged and the sickly ones were really pitiful to watch. The atmosphere was tense and intolerable. I was really concerned about my father for he was not feeling too well. En-route I asked the driver if he could please stop someplace convenient for my father to go to the restroom and I was completely ignored. I just prayed that he would be all right until we reached our destination. That was the "longest" ride that I had ever experienced!

When we arrived at the Puyallup Center, we were dismayed to be crowded inside a small, fenced compound with make-shift, flimsy portables for our housing. What a contrast from our comfortable, warm homes that we had just left behind! I noticed some of the elder women were crying in frustration. I was too busy trying to get settled, especially with a small baby eight months old. The weather was miserable, raining steadily and the mud and the puddles of water around the shacks didn't help any.

During the first week there was an epidemic of flu and bad cases of cold around the entire camp. There were seven of us (one family) in one room since only one room was allowed for a family and if the family size was small, two or three families to a room. You can imagine, no privacy, no peace of mind, might as well be a caged animal. The camp was divided into two groups, living quarters underneath the grandstand and a group across the street on the parking strip. About a month or so later I remember most of the small babies became ill and it was discovered that a certain can of strained baby food was spoiled. The only reason my daughter escaped this was because I was such a "worry wart" and I was very careful about the condition of the food being netted out. I felt that as long as our family was together and in good health, we will be able to survive somehow.

After a couple of months had elapsed, we were given permission to visit the other compound underneath the grandstand. I noticed that there were some Eskimo families, who didn't belong there at all. Their only crime was that they had either one-fourth or one-eighth Japanese blood in them; otherwise they were no more Japanese than millions of their counterparts in Alaska. In fact, they didn't even look Oriental and their life style was different. I heard that the children and some of the adults had contracted tuberculosis due to the extreme change in food and climate and had to be taken away to a hospital. I really felt sorry for them.

Some residents called the center "Camp Harmony". I called it "Heartbreak Camp", happy home disrupted, families broken up, deaths and tragedies.

MINIDOKA RELOCATION CENTER

It was on an equally dreary, rainy, dark day that we were transferred over to our more permanent site in Idaho. I don't remember the exact date, but it was I think around ~~October~~ <sup>SEPT. ?</sup> for I kept thinking to myself what a miserable weather it was, just like when we arrived at Puyallup. We were crammed into a dilapidated, old train ("cattle car"). The ride was long and tiring and our spirits were low just like the weather. Our only consolation was that at least our families were together. I AM NOT SURE ABOUT THE DATE

When we finally reached Idaho, it was getting dark and still raining incessantly. Trudging into the makeshift separation building, we were assigned to our living quarters crowding two or three families to each room due to lack of space because the buildings weren't quite finished yet. What a desolate place! Barren, desert country, which had turned into mud, knee-deep because of the rain. The barracks were divided into about six rooms with about ten or twelve barracks in a unit with a central messhall and outhouses. Our family was put into Block 26. We were supposed to have army cots and blankets, but since there weren't enough to go around, we huddled together and slept on the floor with our coats on. Lack of heat and the dampness chilled us to the bones. We noticed a pot belly stove in the middle of our room so the next day we gathered a bucket of coal from a pile dumped into our area and we managed to have heat from then on. I heard that there were quite a lot of colds and sickness going around.

The sanitary conditions were appalling, especially the outhouses. I, being a city dweller, could never get used to the outside toilet facilities and after dark or at night I was afraid to walk out there. I'm sure I was not alone in this situation. Epidemic of typhoid broke out and the dispensary at the top of the hill was kept busy. I, myself, contracted infection from the unsanitary conditions and I had to go to the doctor (Dr. Suzuki) at the administration building. I recovered after medication and doctor's care, but I was not alone feeling angry about the whole situation.

Around the following week when we were getting used to our new environment, the dinner bell summoned us into the messhall for our supper. We sat down to a plateful of rice and a pickle per each person. The older folks shook their heads and exclaimed that the government was trying to get rid of us by starving us. In view of all that happened, the older folks were very bitter and pessimistic. The "young at heart" took everything blithely and kept the spirits up. Rumors were that the head administrator of the camp (a Federal employee) was involved in "black market" profiteering. The food supplies allotted to us and stored in the camp warehouse were being sold for personal gain so that was why we were being deprived.

When this graft was discovered, there was a big change in the administrative heads. Food became more ample and conditions improved. Outhouses were eliminated. Buildings with boilerroom, laundry facilities, showers and toilets were constructed for each block. A canteen was opened so that the residents could buy pro-

ducts from the outside world. Even recreation halls were built so that schooling and educational programs could be carried out and the same buildings were used for movies and dances for the young people. Life became more pleasant, although the atmosphere of prison camp never faded with barbed wires surrounding the compounds and with soldiers with rifles stationed on high towers and walls over-looking us.

A tragic incident occurred that was the talk of the entire camp. A youth was killed by one of the guards for climbing over the fence. It seems the boy was playing ball with some friends and the ball flew over the fence to the outside. He was climbing over the fence to retrieve the ball and evidently the guard thought he was trying to escape and shot him. This furor discouraged a lot of people from even enjoying a walk or venturing near the fence for quite a while.

One of the highlights that stood out in my memory was my daughter's birthday party. She was about two years old. My father, who worked as a cook at our messhall, baked a cute birthday cake and my mother-in-law bought some chicken from a nearby farmer, who came inside the compound. The party was my effort to duplicate the kind of celebration we used to have back home in Seattle. What spoiled the happy occasion was the heat. The heat was unbearable, way up in the 110° or more. We, from the Northwest, were not used to such extreme weather. Hot in the summer with nothing but desert, sagebrush and rattlesnakes. Tears filled my eyes and a feeling of nostalgia for the green, Northwest scenery welled up inside making me feel so homesick. I missed the clear, soft mountain water in contrast to the hard, lime water. All our kettles and cooking utensils had white rings of lime deposits inside. My nylon stockings disintegrated after a few washings.

In the winter, the weather was another extreme, so many degrees below freezing and the snow piled so high, a person could get lost in the blizzard just going from one block to the next. It was so cold that if we touched any door knobs on the outside, our hands would freeze onto the metal. We had to make sure to put our gloves or mittens on and have our head and ears covered or else suffer from frostbites. For those of us accustomed to a mild climate, it was miserable. It was a shame we were forced to waste four and a half years of our life there.

After couple of years or so, there was a movement among the youths for volunteers for the U. S. Army. My brother-in-law and his friends were very enthusiastic and eager to enlist. His mother was heartbroken and tried to dissuade him. She said that after all, why give your life for a country that treated him and his family so cruelly. To this, he replied, "Mother, this is my country and the only country I know. I want to prove that I am a loyal citizen. Some day everyone will know and understand. You'll see". He left to serve with the famed 442nd Battalion that fought in Italy. We got word shortly after that a lot of his friends, even his best friend, and some of our acquaintances were killed. There were much sorrow and grieving families. Such irony! The boys were giving up their lives for the same country that had imprisoned their families. Really, I earnestly hope that they did not die in vain and this country would now recognize their efforts.

When we heard that war was finally over, we all rejoiced that now we were able to return home and live a normal life. The only anxiety was, "where to", since all of us no longer had homes or residence any more. Not only that, we had no jobs, no business, nothing. In fact, we were totally unprepared for the outside world because of our long confinement. Everyone was busy packing and getting ready. Everybody was gravely concerned about their finances and the future.

In the midst of all this turmoil, there was a terrible tragedy that cast a gloom over all. A young couple with a tiny infant and a toddler was preparing for trip back to Seattle. The wife had been in deep depression for weeks, worrying and troubled about the bleak uncertainties awaiting them on their return back home. The husband was engrossed in packing their belongings. He had to leave to go up to the administrative office to make arrangements. His baby girl (less than a year old) was sleeping in her crib. His wife suddenly went beserk and in anguish grabbed the hammer laying near the crated boxes and struck at the infant several times. Her head was bashed so badly that her brains were spattered all over the sides of the crib. When the father returned, he wrapped her so very gently in a blanket so that "she won't feel so hurt" and carried her to the camp hospital. Poor man! He got on his hands and knees and begged the doctors to save his little girl. What a pity! I cried when I heard about this. How sad that some people just cannot cope with burdens of circumstances!

The government had offered to provide free transportation only back to where we used to reside. I was not too impressed with this. After we reached Seattle, we were very fortunate in finding a place to stay. We didn't realize there was a critical housing shortage. My mother-in-law had a friend, who owned a hotel. We stayed there temporarily until we found our own house. Many others had no place to go. In about a week's time, while still living at the hotel, my father-in-law, who was quite old, passed away suddenly. He couldn't adjust to the sudden and extreme change from Idaho to Seattle. It was a shock to the whole family. We had to call back home my brother-in-law, who was still oversea in the army, for his father's funeral.

Somehow our family life was certainly disrupted by this evacuation. Even though my husband and I were newly-weds at the onset of the war, we were separated most of the time after leaving Seattle. He left Idaho camp to look for work elsewhere while I stayed with his mother, father and my baby daughter. My daughter was eight months old when we were evacuated and she was almost five years old, ready to start Kindergarten, when we returned. She certainly did not have any semblance of a normal family life during the vital years she was growing up in camp. After couple of years back in Seattle, my husband and I got divorced. I really don't know whether the emotional upheaval of family ties compounded by environmental problems caused this break-up or not. All I can say is that it certainly did not help any. I am sure all those years of trying experiences and hardships will not be forgotten by all concerned.

In closing, may I express my personal opinion. The older Japanese, like our parents, always tried to be docile and never liked to "make waves", much to their disadvantages. They prided themselves on having self-control or "gaman" (ability to take it on the chin, no matter what). I call it, "false pride". I hope we are going to be listened to this time and not be "put back on the shelf" as in the past. The older folks, Isseis, who suffered the brunt of the injustice are dying fast and most of them are already gone. Their children, the Niseis, are getting up in years and are gradually dying off, too. What good will it do to explain to a cold grave, "Mother, you were wrong. Our government does acknowledge the wrong it committed and wants to make amends. Please don't pass judgement". I beseech the U. S. government to please hurry before it's too late to show your good faith and make amends while the rest of us are still here to appreciate it.

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P.S. I am not too sure about the dates, it's been so long.

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