
A Travelin' Girl

I WAS BORN WHERE I DIDN'T BELONG. At two I became the enemy, a would-be spy, a threat to US internal security. Soon I was removed with 120,000 others who looked like me to a place the grown-ups called "camp." But it was no summer camp.

My first memory is of riding on my father's shoulders. It was dusty, and there were rows of wooden shacks. We were waiting in a long line with lots of other families, all Japanese. My father's big shoulders made me feel like I was riding an elephant in a parade, looking down on a river of heads covered with hats and scarves, protecting them from a chilly wind. But this parade had no music, no happy shouts, no people waving, no colorful drum majorettes marching. There was only hushed chattering, clutching of children, men in drab uniforms with rifles in hand.

We were moving toward a large building they called a mess hall, where we were going to eat. The food came from cans with a clatter of spoons and forks on metal plates, food that soldiers ate. I was hungry but refused to eat. There was a reason they called it a mess hall. We were at Santa Anita Park racetrack in Arcadia, California, once the playground of the rich and famous. Movie stars like Bing Crosby, Spencer Tracy, and Errol Flynn owned horses that lived and raced there. Now, we slept in the horses' stalls.

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. It took the US government just three months to transform the ritzy racetrack, a convenient twenty-one miles east of Los Angeles, into a temporary holding camp where 18,000 Japanese, mostly US citizens, could be stored in its 8,500 horse stalls and more than 60 barns. All it needed was more barracks. We were being held there while the government built ten permanent concentration camps scattered in inconvenient, remote places, many on Indian reservations:

Manzanar, Tule Lake, Topaz, Gila River, Poston, Jerome, Heart Mountain, Rohwer, Amache, and Minidoka. More than 120,000 Japanese Americans were removed from our homes in California, Oregon, Washington, and even parts of Arizona, and would be held in these camps until the end of the war with Japan—or maybe forever. We didn't know.

The tsunami that swept us into camp began in smaller waves from the moment my grandfathers stepped onto US shores. Like African slaves, Chinese and Japanese labor was an unwelcome necessity to develop this country, a need us/hate us relationship. Their labor and lives were seen as cheap, or in the case of the enslaved, free.

My mom's father, Tamejiro Oga, was a second son of a farming family in Tachiarai, Fukuoka prefecture, Japan. Only the oldest son would inherit land, so in 1905 he pursued his dream of a rice farm in California, taking on backbreaking work to clear the virgin land. My dad's father, Miyamoto, from Kumamoto, was among those recruited to work on the railroad, replacing Chinese laborers who were organizing against unfair treatment.

In 1913, a year before my mom was born, the Alien Land Law stopped her father from owning the farmland he cleared in Chico, California, because he wasn't a citizen. Every European, on the other hand, had an immediate right to naturalized citizenship. Those words on the Statue of Liberty were not meant for us. I wonder what America would look like if anyone who came to this land had been welcomed—by the Indians, of course. In 1924 the Japanese Exclusion Act slammed the door on Japanese immigration, and the media and the movie business stayed busy stirring up racist fantasies of Japanese invading the United States. Now their fantasies seemed real.

On December 8, the day after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, my friend Reiko, who was ten, went to school and heard speakers blare President Roosevelt's speech declaring war on Japan. At recess kids taunted her and asked if she had webbed feet. "All of a sudden I was the enemy." The next day White men came to her house and took away her father, a Buddhist priest. They later sent him to Japan. She never got to say goodbye, and she never saw him again. Many Japanese community leaders were swept up and imprisoned on that day. The government already knew who they were and where they lived. My family's fate would take a little more time.

Each day my mother, Mitsue, and her older sister, Hatsue, sipped coffee and murmured their worries over the kitchen table. They were used to shar-

ing hardships. They were nisei (second generation), born in Oakland, but life was still hard in America. They'd been sent at a young age to Japan to be raised by their grandparents, a common practice. After ten years of living in comfort there, their mother, Misao, came to collect them and take them home to Los Angeles. Then Misao died. At the ages of twelve and fourteen, the sisters had to take over running the household: caring for a younger sister, cooking for their father's gardening crew, struggling to learn English while going to a strange new school.

Mitsue's and Hatsue's worries enshrouded the whole Japanese community. War hysteria was on the radio, invading our house, our lives. They tried to shield me and my cousin Kay, but we knew something was wrong. Ordinary things like going grocery shopping became embarrassing and fearful events—the hate in people's eyes, newspaper racks blaring “OUSTER THE JAPS,” *Life* magazine's story showing how to tell the difference between a Chinese and a *Jap*. My mom wanted to scream her anger: “We're not Japanese Americans anymore, we're all *Japs*!” My mother had become much more American than her older sister. Hatsue married a man from Japan, a marriage that was arranged by a *bishakunin* (go-between), with her approval. For the marriage to be accepted by his family, she had to agree to become a Buddhist (which she put off for twenty years). Hatsue seemed satisfied to be a mother and housewife. Mitsue, on the other hand, always sought something more, some way to express herself. She went from Mitsue to Mitzi (to her girlfriends) and told her father she wanted to be an artist.

“No! No thing for woman!”

Somehow she found a way to go to Chouinard Art Institute. She loved the latest fashions, going on to Trade Tech for fashion design. Like many Japanese women of her generation, she was an expert seamstress. She made all her own clothes and mine, too. That became her art.

Mom also made up her mind to marry for love. Her mother, Misao, had married a picture of a man she'd not yet met. She was a “picture bride,” who like many Japanese women in those early days met their husbands for the first time when they stepped off the boat. Asian men who immigrated were not allowed to bring a wife. But while living in Japan, my mom saw one of Misao's sisters marry for love. That was rare in Japanese culture, which traditionally stressed good matches based on economic and family ties. Mitzi was a modern girl and love was what she wanted. When she told her father she wanted to marry Mark Miyamoto, a handsome half-breed, Japanese and Caucasian, Grandpa put his foot down. “No! No good! Who is family?”

It took her five years to stand up to him: “I’m going to marry him whether you like it or not!”

My father, like most nisei men, swallowed his worries in silence. Though his mixed blood made him taller than most Japanese men, he saw himself as no different. He shared their troubles and challenges. Born in Parker, Idaho, to an English Mormon mother and a Japanese immigrant father, my dad was fourteen when his mother, Lucy Harrison, died and Grandpa Harry Miyamoto decided to take his boys to Los Angeles for a better life. My father achieved his first big dream playing baseball at Hollywood High School. He was an ambidextrous pitcher with the LA Nippons, a semipro team in the Japanese American League. They played the likes of Satchel Paige in the Negro League. He was in good company with other men of color when that dream bit the dust.

Dad also had big ears—not only in size, but in what he could hear. He listened to classical music, listened deep. He not only had his favorite composers, but he knew when it was Iturbi rather than Rubinstein playing the piano. And *he* wanted to play the piano too. But fat chance for a nisei to make a living as a musician in those days! Another dream in the dust.

Most issei and nisei were gardeners or in the produce business. So Dad took a job trucking strawberries, onions, and rice for Japanese farmers up and down California. That’s when those big ears came in handy. It was easy for him to pick up Japanese so he could communicate with his farmers.

One day Mark came home and said to Mitsue: “Give me the savings.”

“What for?” She was the guardian of the money.

“I’m going to buy a truck!”

He was going into business for himself. His independent spirit liked the idea. He also liked having money in his pocket. Business was going good. So in 1940 he went to Chicago to pick up a second truck, a brand-new Mack semi. Now he had two semis! Life was so good, we soon had a nifty new green Packard sedan in our driveway.

Maybe business was *too* good. His nisei buddies at the produce market were talking about greedy White farmers pushing for “Japs” to be removed. They were farming nearly a half million acres in California, a rising force in the economy. White farmers were clucking like vultures to take over their farms and made no secret of it. Mark was looking at the dust again.

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, giving the War Department the power to designate military areas from

which “any or all persons may be excluded.” One of those “military areas” was our neighborhood on Kingsley Drive where Japanese families lived among White neighbors. Another was my auntie’s neighborhood in Arlington Heights, where they lived among Black people. Curfews were imposed, and my father stayed closer to home. That made me happy, but he knew the noose was tightening around us.

In early April 1942, signs were posted: INSTRUCTIONS TO ALL PERSONS OF JAPANESE ANCESTRY . . .

It didn’t matter that you were a US citizen, or if you were only half Japanese like my dad, or if you were a two-year-old like me. If you had up to 16 percent Japanese blood, you might be a spy, a saboteur. No “innocent until proven guilty,” no trial, no jury of your peers. President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 considered all Japanese who lived near the Pacific Coast a threat to US internal security, even though at the war’s end, only ten people were found guilty of spying, all of them Caucasian.

We had to pack our lives into suitcases and report to the designated assembly place—to be taken where? Look what they did to the Indians! Look what they’re doing to the Jews! How long would we be gone? A few years? Forever? Words like “evacuation” and “relocation camps” were misnomers. It was forced removal, like they did to Native people. It was not a relocation camp, it was a concentration camp. That order not only swept away our freedom; it ignored our American identity, it removed our sense of belonging. Our belongingness had always been tenuous, fragile, and now, no matter our superheroic efforts at being accepted as American, we would always wear the face of a foreigner. We weren’t just second-class citizens—we weren’t seen as citizens at all. We were neither Japanese nor American. We were exiles, refugees in our own country, prisoners of a war we didn’t support.

The mass removal of 120,000 people was no easy task. It was almost half the population of all Japanese living in the United States, mostly citizens. Removing us from our homes, clearing us from our neighborhoods, disappearing us from our schools and workplaces, cleansing us from land we cleared and nurtured, leaving behind friends, lovers, businesses, homes, cars, pets, family treasures, dreams—was painful and complicated. Our cooperation was a necessity to evacuate all who lived within fifty miles along the coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington. There were negotiations, individuals who took a stand, but no noisy mass demonstration against our

unjust treatment, no public outcry to defend us. Japan's repressive culture taught us to be obedient. And living in America had taught us that we "didn't have a Chinaman's chance." But mostly we were in shock, in disbelief, that this could happen in America.

Some, like my dad's brothers, tried to make a run for it. Grandpa Miyamoto had already returned to his little family land in Parker, Idaho. He left behind a truck from his East Hollywood nursery. Kay, the youngest, who looked more like their White mother, drove. Harry, the oldest and most Japanese-looking, hid underneath the bed of the truck. They made it across the California border to Nevada, but just as they crossed into Idaho, they got arrested. Sort of like driving while Japanese. Grandpa Harry came and bailed them out. Years later, Harry Jr., who was always broke, found a way to keep three \$100 bills tucked deep into his wallet just in case he ever had to make a run for it again.

Dad couldn't take chances. He had me and Mom to think about. Leaving our cozy home on Kingsley Street was chaotic. While Mom decided what to take, what to sell, where to store things, and what to leave behind, Dad was scrambling to keep from losing everything he'd worked for. He had no choice but to leave behind his two semi trucks. He hoped his worker and friend, Joe Ponce, could run the business in his absence.

We were ordered to assemble in Little Tokyo. First Street was a place my mother sometimes took me shopping. In the summer of 1941 we went there for Nisei Week, a festival with Japanese *odori* dancing, exhibits, and a talent show, started by second-generation Japanese Americans to foster pride and bring younger Japanese Americans into Little Tokyo. My mother entered me in the Nisei Week Baby Show, a cuteness contest invented by prideful parents. When the judges came around to look at my mother's little pride, I broke into a crying fit, maybe my first form of protest. Needless to say, I didn't win.

Now my mother, father, and I were in an ocean of confused families, worried and waiting. This time I didn't cry, I didn't protest, I couldn't find a sound within me. There were lots of children younger and older than me, not playing but strangely quiet, clinging to their parents, sitting on suitcases. A big bus arrived, hissing and screeching. As the soldiers loaded us, my father swept me into his arms as my mother scurried for seats. As the bus grunted into movement, the bickering over seats broke into shrieks and cries, not just among children, but grown-ups as well. We were being taken away from the tofu and *manju* sweet shops, from the photography studio where I took my baby photo, from the hardware store where gardeners sharpened their blades,