

Home Was a Horse Stall

This true story is about the internment of a Japanese American family during World War II.

Yumi Ishimaru was used to picking up and moving on. In 1905, at the age of 20, she left Yamaguchi, Japan, for San Francisco to marry a man she had only seen in a picture. After being detained with other "picture brides" for medical tests at Angel Island, Yumi reached the mainland, met Masajiro Kataoka, and found him shorter than she had expected.

Masajiro, also from Yamaguchi, operated a restaurant off Fillmore Street. After they were married, Yumi went to work as a housekeeper for an American family. Before long, she was expecting her first child. The Kataokas' prospects looked good.

But the great earthquake of April 1906 destroyed Masajiro's restaurant and left the young couple homeless. They lived for a while in a tent in Sacramento Park, then later in a succession of small apartments. Yumi gave birth to a daughter that summer.

Masajiro decided not to rebuild his restaurant. He was tired of city life, of the mobsters who pressured honest businessmen to pay for "protection." He and Yumi and their new baby left San Francisco, and Masajiro made a fresh start as a tenant farmer. He saw a bright future in strawberry farming and hoped one day to own some land.

No citizenship, no land

In 1913, the state of California dashed Masajiro's hope of ever owning his own farm. A new law denied the right of land ownership to anyone who was not eligible to become a U.S. citizen. And, according to the federal Naturalization Law of 1790, only white immigrants were permitted to become naturalized citizens.

Although the California alien land law didn't mention the Japanese or any other group by name, its intent was obvious. Ever since the Gold Rush of 1849, white workers in the Western states had seen Asians arrive in increasing numbers to find a place in the American economy. During hard times, competition for jobs brought racial tensions to the surface.

In 1906, the San Francisco school board segregated all Japanese, Chinese and Korean children into an "Oriental" school. When the Japanese government protested, President Theodore Roosevelt offered a deal: He would reverse the school policy if Japan agreed to let only professionals of certain categories emigrate to the United States. The so-called Gentlemen's Agreement prevented an international confrontation, but bias against the Japanese in California increased. The 1913 alien land law was designed to make people like Yumi and Masajiro Kataoka permanent outsiders.

From Tsuyako to "Sox"

Farm life was hard work for the Kataokas. Yumi and Masajiro eventually had six children, and all of them had chores to do before and after school. Tsuyako, the youngest daughter, was born in 1918. She got her nickname, "Sox," from white friends who couldn't pronounce her real name. The nickname made her feel more American. Sox remembers that there was no Saturday or Sunday or Monday in the strawberry business, only Workday. And she remembers that no matter how difficult and tiring the labor, her mother was usually singing.

In 1932 Masajiro began renting farmland from a Mrs. Perkins, a strong-willed pioneer rancher whose family owned one of the largest rose nurseries in the world. Mrs. Perkins didn't make Masajiro sign a contract for the land. She even let him build his own house on it. She hired Sox's older sister, Nobuko, to work in her big ranch house. Nobuko got her nickname, "Nee," from the Perkins children, who were tall for their ages and considered her tiny. Nee cooked and cleaned and performed many more tasks than were expected of her, such as chopping firewood. In fact, she was such a vigorous worker that after she married and moved away, everyone else Mrs. Perkins hired seemed lazy by comparison.

Masajiro Kataoka died in late 1940. In keeping with Buddhist tradition, Yumi had his body cremated. Since he had always wanted to see Japan again, Yumi and Nee decided to take his ashes back for burial in Yamaguchi. They went in the late fall of 1941. At that time, World War II was raging in Europe, and many feared that conflict would soon erupt between the U.S. and Japan. Nee and her mother got back to California just before that fear came true.

Sunday morning, December 7, 1941

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, Sox, her sister Lillian and their mother were riding in the car. A special bulletin on the radio announced that the Japanese had mounted a surprise air attack on the U.S. Naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The girls translated the news for Yumi. "This is terrible," Yumi said to them in Japanese. Because she was an Issei ("first generation" Japanese immigrant), she was not a U.S. citizen. Her native country was now the enemy.

Sox and Lillian knew that their lives were about to change. They were Americans, born on American soil. They listened to the

same music, followed the same fashions, pledged allegiance to the same flag as everyone else. But now they wondered how other Americans would treat them. They wondered if the storekeepers would still sell them food. Over the next few weeks, shops in towns around the area began posting signs telling Japanese customers to stay away. Old hostilities found new expression in the name of patriotism. There were scattered incidents of violence against Japanese Americans and their property.

The Kataokas had a mailbox at the post office in Centerville. Every morning, Sox went in to pick up the mail. After the Pearl Harbor attack, the postmaster began holding the family's mail at the window instead of putting it in the box, so that Sox had to come and ask him for it. This way, he could ask her questions, such as "How do you feel about the bombing?" or "What do you think is going to happen to you people?" Sox hated this daily confrontation. She kept her answers short and left as quickly as possible.

Civilian Exclusion Order No. 27

The question about what was going to happen was partially answered on February 19, 1942. President Franklin D. Roosevelt on that day issued Executive Order 9066, establishing "military areas" along the West Coast and limiting the activities of "any or all persons" within them. Two months later, Civilian Exclusion Order No. 27 narrowed the focus of the restrictions by announcing that "all persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien," would be "excluded" from the West Coast. Even Nisei ("second generation"), or those born in America to Japanese parents, were now unwelcome. The order disrupted the lives of 112,000 people, two-thirds of them U.S. citizens.

Evacuation orders posted on telephone poles and public buildings declared that Japanese Americans had one week to prepare to leave their homes. In the meantime, they had to abide by an 8 p.m. curfew and get permits to travel.

The instructions didn't tell people where they would be going, but they did tell them what to bring: only the bare necessities, like clothing and linens and soap. When someone said they could take what they could carry in two hands, the Kataokas took this literally. They had never owned suitcases, so they got a permit to go to a nearby town and buy two each of flimsy cardboard ones, outrageously priced.

Deciding what to pack was easy; getting rid of the rest was not. Anything obviously Japanese could be interpreted as a sign of collaboration with the enemy. Yumi Kataoka burned her family's Japanese books and letters, advertising calendars from Japanese businesses, even her certificates from a Japanese bank. Many people burned family keepsakes such as photographs and antique kimonos.

As for their other possessions, the evacuees had two choices: either leave them to be stolen or sell them at the going rate. One of Yumi's sons sold two cars, a long-bed truck and a Caterpillar tractor for a fraction of their worth. The Kataokas got \$15 for their piano, and Sox was so happy to see it going home with someone that she gave the buyer all her sheet music and even threw her tennis racket into the bargain. Some people in the valley refused to trade their brand new stoves or refrigerators for pocket change, so they stored them in the Japanese school building, in hopes of retrieving them when the war was over.

"Leaving day"

May 9, 1942, was leaving day. A few days beforehand, Mrs. Perkins got in touch with Nee and told her to bring her whole family to the ranch house for a farewell breakfast. The invitation meant a lot to the Kataokas because most of the other white people they knew had shunned them. That morning, Mrs. Perkins ushered them into her beautiful formal dining room. The long table was set with her best china and crystal and silver. She usually had someone to cook and serve meals for her, but this time she did everything herself. When Nee and Sox offered to help her bring the food out, she told them that now it was her turn to serve.

After breakfast, Mrs. Perkins drove the Kataokas in her Oldsmobile to the grounds of the Japanese school, where buses were waiting. The fellow who ran the local hamburger stand was the only other white person who came to say goodbye. It hurt Sox's feelings that her close friends didn't show up, but she decided the reason was that they were afraid.

Yumi Kataoka had moved her family many times, but never like this. The bus let them out at Tanforan Racetrack in San Bruno, Calif. No one knew what to expect. None of the Kataokas had even been to a racetrack before. Inside, military policemen searched each person. All suitcases were opened and ransacked. A nurse peered into every eye and down every throat.

"Their new home was a horse stall."

On the infield of the track stood new, army-style barracks. Sox said that she wanted to stay in those, but the officer said they were for mothers with infants. He led the Kataokas around back to the stables: Their new home was a horse stall.

The building contained two back-to-back rows of 10 stalls each. Five adults - Sox and her three brothers and their mother - had a 9- by 20-foot enclosure to share. Manure littered the dirt floor. The walls had been recently whitewashed, but carelessly, so that horsehair and dirt were smeared in. And the walls reached only halfway to the roof - there were no ceilings. The nearest bathroom was a long walk away.

Sox worried about how her mother would take such humiliation. She was proud of Yumi for keeping the hurt hidden, for acting as if this were just another move. She knew that keeping the family together was Yumi's biggest concern.

The officers passed out cloth sacks for everyone to fill with hay for mattresses. In the dark stall that night, listening to the noises of all the other people, Sox couldn't fall asleep. She couldn't stop wondering what any of them had done to deserve being penned up like animals. She couldn't believe this was happening in America.

It didn't take Sox long to learn the local routine, including how early she had to get up to find an empty tub in the laundry shed. Her brothers washed dishes in the mess hall. There were long lines everywhere - for the toilets, for the laundry, for food. As clothing wore out, people shopped by mail from the Sears Roebuck catalog.

Occasionally, Mrs. Perkins came to visit. When she saw the damp dirt floor of the drafty stall, she went home and ripped up the linoleum from the Kataokas' kitchen and brought it to them. She didn't want Yumi's rheumatism to get worse. Another time, she took Sox's broken wristwatch to have it repaired.

Concentration camp in the desert

For four long months, daydreams and small acts of kindness made their internment bearable. Every night, Sox wondered what the next day would bring. There was very little official news about the government's plans, so rumors were the main source of information. Late in the summer a rumor went around that the Japanese were going to be moved inland, to a concentration camp in the desert. Everyone started ordering high-top boots from the catalog - there were scorpions and snakes out there. According to some people, once they got to the new location, the government was going to drop a bomb on them.

Some of the rumors turned out to be true. At the end of the summer, Sox, Yumi and the other Japanese were packed into buses and driven east into the desert. Sox had never seen a place as dry and dusty and lifeless as Topaz, Utah. It looked like the surface of the moon. But when she saw the rows and rows of new barracks, some of them still unfinished, she could have kissed the ground. She reasoned that if the government was spending the time and money to build housing for her people, then it must not be planning to kill them.

The Kataokas' new quarters measured 20 by 24 feet -- a little roomier than the horse stall and a lot cleaner. A single naked light bulb hung from the ceiling. In the corner stood a pot-bellied stove. By stringing up a few sheets, family members could carve out the illusion of privacy. The communal bathroom had six toilets and no doors.

There were no chairs or tables. People scoured the construction site for materials. In just a short time, many families skillfully fashioned whole sets of furniture from orange crates and scrap lumber. Later, some residents laid out beautiful rock gardens on the barren ground.

Pulling together to avoid despair

Even in this strange new environment, much about camp life was familiar - the crowded living space, the boredom, the long lines for every necessity. But Sox began to notice changes in the people around her. In the dining hall, children made friends quickly and sat together in groups. The family meal - a central part of Japanese life - was losing its importance. A deeper toll resulted from unemployment: Fathers, no longer breadwinners, began to lose their self-respect and, sometimes, the respect of their families. Everyone was aimless now. Everyone was a small step from stir-crazy.

Camp residents had to pull together to avert despair. They formed social clubs and choirs and sports teams. They started newsletters to share information and ideas.

Sox had the good fortune to get a job as assistant block manager. She was responsible for looking after about 200 people in 72 rooms. The managers met every morning to discuss the needs of their residents. Extremes of climate caused many problems, since temperatures often reached well below zero in the winter and over 100 in the summer months. Food was another source of complaint. The animal innards such as liver, gizzard, tongue, brains and chitterlings that made up much of the meat ration were foreign to the Japanese diet. Sox found them sickening. When the quality of meat improved after a while, Sox decided that the project director must have figured out that her people were human.

The block manager meetings gave Sox and the others some sense of value. But everywhere they looked, barbed wire and police patrols and curfews and watchtowers with armed guards constantly reminded them of their status.

The word around camp was "Don't go near the fence." Most of the military policemen were fresh out of combat duty, and they did not hesitate to use their weapons. At Topaz one day, a man was picking some wildflowers along the barbed wire. A guard yelled "Halt!" but the man was hard of hearing. He kept on picking and was shot. And once, a grandfather playing catch with his grandson went to retrieve the ball from just beyond the fence. The guard who killed him told authorities that the old man had tried to escape.

Japanese soldiers join American forces

As the war in Europe and the Pacific intensified, the government realized that many potentially able soldiers were sitting idle in the camps. In early 1943 Pres. Roosevelt wrote to the Secretary of War and contradicted his earlier Executive Order: "Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry. Every loyal American citizen should be given the opportunity to serve this country in the ranks of our armed forces."

By means of a "loyalty questionnaire," Uncle Sam began recruiting Nisei. In all, more than 30,000 Japanese Americans joined the service during the war. Others protested that they wouldn't serve until their families were allowed to return to the West Coast. About 300 so-called "no-no boys" refused to pledge their loyalty and were jailed for draft resistance. The questionnaire was also used as a means of releasing internees into the work force. In the camps, this process – however objectionable – stirred the first hopes of freedom.

On November 11, 1944, President Roosevelt lifted the Civilian Exclusion Order. A month later, the government announced that the internment camps would be closed within a year.

Returning home

Sox married a young man named Tom Kitashima in August 1945, just as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought the war to its conclusion. The camp supervisor offered her a job helping to process the closure of the camp. But since he didn't have a job for Tom, Sox said she couldn't stay. Even so, the supervisor found her a good position in San Francisco.

A few nights before Sox and Tom were set to leave Topaz, the supervisor and his wife invited them out for dinner and a cowboy movie in the town of Delta, 16 miles from the camp. There were rules against this kind of socializing, but the white couple didn't seem to care. The supervisor also gave them a blanket for the cold train ride to San Francisco – the government was using old dilapidated railroad cars to relocate the internees. On an October morning in 1945, Sox repacked the suitcase she had been living out of for three years and four months.

Yumi Kataoka, now 60 years old, prepared to move one more time. People were heading in all directions – there was nothing left to go back to. Yumi joined a large group headed for a housing center at Richmond, Calif. In time, Yumi and her scattered children heard reports from the valley that used to be their home. The Japanese school building had been emptied of all the stored appliances. The house that Masajiro had built on Mrs. Perkins' place was gone now, along with all the little things the family had left behind. Someone told them that the old strawberry fields had been planted over with roses.

The road to reparation

Shortly after the war was over, the government began considering ways to compensate Japanese Americans for their internment. In 1947, all Japanese American draft resisters received a presidential pardon. The following year, the Evacuation Claims Act provided partial repayment for lost or destroyed property, but the slow processing of claims drew widespread criticism.

Gradually, pressure mounted for new laws to guarantee that nothing like the relocation program could ever happen again. During the Bicentennial celebration in 1976, President Gerald Ford revoked Executive Order 9066 and formally apologized to Japanese Americans. Four years later, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians began its investigation, which resulted in passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

Under the provisions of this law, each surviving internee received \$20,000 as a symbolic reparation for their hardship. The law also provided compensation for the Aleut people of Alaska who were relocated from their island homes after a Japanese invasion. In addition, the act established a fund for educating the public about the internment experience.

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