

One day, I visit a Japanese American friend and notice a worn booklet, published in 1942 by the American federal agency, the War Relocation Authority. It is addressed to "Americans of Japanese Ancestry."

Inside, it says: "The democracies of the world are joined in a fight that will be fought until it is won. In this fight, all Americans are making difficult sacrifices... Wartime considerations make it necessary for you to leave your homes, your property, and old associations on the Pacific Coast military frontier, and to seek out a new, temporary way of living for the duration of the war..."

The impossibility of it almost lifts me out of my body. A chill passes through me and the hairs stand up on my arms, but I feel hot at the same time, from the blood suddenly surging through my veins.

Japanese Americans must have felt this same way, the way I did after our bomb, humiliated at being so publicly singled out and punished. But that had been one day in our lives. Japanese Americans were exiled for more than three years, simply for being who they were, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The booklet contains a page of handy definitions:

An Assembly Center was a "convenient gathering point" where evacuees stayed until they were sent to a relocation center. This included the Santa Anita racetrack, where, at its peak, more than 18,000 people lived for months. Of those, 8,500 lived in the stables.

A Relocation Center was a "pioneer community, with basic housing and protective services" – including barbed wire, guard towers and armed guards. In all, some 117,000 Japanese Americans, including more than 60,000 children, were interned in 10 isolated camps in the desert or the mountains in one of the worst civil rights violations of the 20th century.

Internees over the age of 16 were allowed to work in the camps. Doctors, teachers, laborers, mechanics and farmers earned, at most, the same as an Army private. In order to work, they had to swear their loyalty to the United States. But if the government was willing to believe they were loyal after they were interned, why were they interned in the first place?

I've stumbled into an Alice in Wonderland world, where words have taken on bizarre new meanings, and nothing means what it seems to. I feel disconnected, overwhelmed. Suddenly there is no safe place to put my feet, nothing I can count on as being real.

Now I understand the dazed looks not only in photographs of Japanese Americans lined up at the assembly centers in California, but also of Jews waiting to be herded onto cattle cars in Europe. Nothing in their lives could have led them to consider that such a situation was in the realm of reality. I wonder if even the Jews who knew they were going to their deaths believed until the last moment that the whole nightmare would be called off. It is too much of a leap for most of us, to acknowledge that the impossible is happening.

My friend doesn't want to talk about it. "It's over," she says. "Besides, I was only a child. Lots of children don't have perfect childhoods. The people who really suffered, the adults, are all dead."

And in a way, she preferred being interned to being in school. "I was in second grade," she says, looking hurt even now. "Before we went to the camp, we used to have bomb drills. No one ever said anything, but I knew it was my fault."

I need to find someone who does want to talk about it.

I meet Buddy at the Japanese American Museum in Los Angeles. At first his gentle, round face glows with good humor. Then he slips into the rhythm of his story, which begins when his grandfather moved from Japan to Hawaii more than a hundred years ago. It ends with the three years Buddy spent at the concentration camp in Heart Mountain, Wyoming, when he was a Boy Scout in junior high.

In the late 1800s, economic problems and drought drove thousands of unmarried men from Japan to Hawaii and the west coasts of North, Central and South America. These immigrants, or 'Issei,' worked on railroads, on farms, in fishing and in lumber. Some were students. Buddy's grandfather worked in Hawaii's pineapple fields.

To most Americans, all Japanese were the same, but these men heard the differences in their dialects and saw it in their cultures. Buddy's grandfather had come from Kiyushu village in Kumamoto Prefecture. He was as different from immigrants from Tokyo as New Yorkers are from Californians, as Yankees are from Southerners.

The men formed communities with others from their village or their region. "Like an extended family," Buddy says.

The communities began to unite against the discrimination they faced. When Americans wouldn't give them work, they worked with each other. Later, they tried to fight new laws: the one that stopped Japanese from becoming American citizens, the one that stopped them from buying land, the one that stopped more Japanese from immigrating.

The children of these immigrants, including Buddy's father, who was born in Hawaii in 1898, went to American schools, read American books and magazines, listened to American radio programs, watched American movies. They learned American values, which sometimes complemented, but often contradicted, the values they were learning at home.

Buddy's father moved to the Santa Clara Valley in California and married a woman he had never met. She was from his grandfather's village, where he had never been.

"People feel a certain connection with others from the same place," Buddy says. "They know the village, how people behave, their values. They get a lot of comfort from being together."

He leased land from the farmer next door and began raising strawberries. "No one would sell my father land," Buddy says. "No one would give him a loan even when it was legal for Japanese to own land."

Buddy was born in 1929. In 1941, when he was a Boy Scout in eighth grade, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and brought the United States into World War II.

The American government still assumed that all Japanese were the same, and suspected the ones on the West Coast of being potential spies for Japan.

First, the government in the United States imposed a curfew on them. One evening, Buddy broke it so he could go to his Boy Scout meeting. "They wanted me there," he says. "I was a member in good standing."

A boy in his troop told his parents, who called the police. The FBI went out to the farm to find out if Buddy was a spy. "I was almost certain they were going to take my dad away," Buddy says, shaking his head. "That was the end of Boy Scouts for awhile."

Then Buddy and his family began to hear rumors that all ethnic Japanese on the West Coast would be sent to concentration camps for the rest of the war. "We were just finishing civics in school," Buddy says, "learning about government and the constitution. When I heard the rumors, I said, "No way. I'm an American citizen.""

Before World War II, the term "concentration camp" meant any guarded compound where members of ethnic minorities and political opponents were confined. As the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps became known, the American government changed its term to "internment camps."

These camps have the same thing in common, says a sign in the museum. People in power remove a minority group from the general population and the rest of society lets it happen.

Buddy's family could have moved east, like thousands of other Japanese did, to Utah, Colorado, New Jersey, Chicago. "My dad had put all his money and labor into growing strawberries," Buddy says. "He wasn't going to abandon the harvest the next month. My parents also weren't going to pull up stakes, move their kids away right before graduation. Besides, where would we go? How could they know if it would be any better anywhere else?"

A month before Buddy graduated from eighth grade, his family found themselves on a train to the assembly center at the Santa Anita Racetrack. They lived in the stables for the next four months with their battered suitcases and trunks.

"Some families lost everything," Buddy says. "We were lucky. Two neighboring farmers, including our landlord, took care of our household goods and farm equipment while we were away. One of them was Irish and the other an immigrant from France. They caught a lot of heat for supporting us."

Buddy was allowed to take all the clothes he could fit into his duffel bag, except for his Boy Scout uniform. It was khaki color, and the government was afraid the 13-year-old might disguise himself as a soldier and sneak out of the camp. He cut an emblem off it instead, one he had received at a Boy Scout Camperama. He squeezed in a plaque with the Boy Scout oath that his father had bought for him.

The rims of Buddy's eyes begin to turn red. "The only visible support I received was from my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. James." Buddy says her name slowly and clearly.

I know he realizes she is long dead, but it's almost as if by acknowledging her that he is thanking her, more than 50 years later. "She was the only one who came to say goodbye at the train station. I found out later she gave up her record of 25 years of perfect attendance as a teacher to do it."

Buddy wipes his eyes and goes on. "Later, she mailed me my diploma. She'd found it in the wastebasket."

By the time Buddy got out of the camp, Mrs. James had retired and moved away. He was never able to trace her.

Few white Americans saw the human beings behind the face of the enemy. Some supported them on principle: a few lawyers and politicians, Quakers, the ACLU. Most of their supporters -- neighbors, teachers, a librarian -- had known them before the war. One pretended to be Japanese so he would be interned with his friends. Another sneaked film to interned photographer Toyo Miyatake, who took remarkable photographs that documented life at the camp at Manzanar.

Buddy and his family left Santa Anita in September and arrived at Heart Mountain four days later.

The Heart Mountain concentration camp was divided into blocks. Each one housed people from a different area: Central Washington, San Jose, the Santa Clara Valley, Los Angeles. Buddy's family already knew some of the farmers in their block. One of his uncles was there with his family, and one of his aunts with hers.

Buddy doesn't remember spending much time with his parents. He went to the school that adults had set up, shot marbles, watched baseball, played and ate with his friends.

"It would have been nicer if our family could have eaten together," he says. "That really led to the fragmentation of the family."

At Heart Mountain, even the children noticed the differences between the groups. "From time to time there were conflicts," Buddy says. "My friends and I from San Jose stayed together and played sports. The ones from Los Angeles were tough guys. The way they dressed seemed foreign. They were very intimidating."

But after all, he says, kids couldn't really get into trouble in the camp. A barbed wire fence and armed guards in watchtowers equipped with high beam searchlights surrounded it.

Although they had no contact with scouting beyond the barbed wire, they had their own district inside. Buddy was a senior patrol leader. "We had a fantastic program," Buddy says. "The troops were divided into the areas they came from, and we held competitions between us. The Los Angeles troop was the biggest, and the one to beat." Buddy smiles, remembering. "We beat them -- once."

Kids can adjust to almost anything, Buddy says, but life in the camp was hard on adults. "All of a sudden, what did it mean to be the head of the household?" he asks. "Parents and grandparents had little control over their lives. Their economic base was gone."

Buddy's parents found that work lessened their feelings of isolation and hopelessness. His mother became a cook's aide, and his father worked with other men clearing sagebrush and cactus from the area. They built irrigation ditches with help from the older boys during their summer vacation, and grew potatoes, sugar beets and other vegetables. The land is still fertile there now.

Traditional Japanese values also helped see them through. Respect for authority, for one. And who was the highest authority? Buddy answers his own question: The American government.

"My mom and dad said, "This is our country. Somehow we'll get out of this." They warned us not to do anything to bring shame on the family."

The most serious division among the Japanese in the camps came when the American government first allowed them to volunteer, and then drafted them, into the army.

Some 1,000 internees, men and women, from all 10 camps volunteered because they believed it would prove their loyalty to the United States. Most were too embittered by what had happened to them.

They joined the unit of 10,000 Japanese Americans who had volunteered in Hawaii, where no Japanese were interned. They fought in North Africa, Italy, France and Germany, where they liberated the survivors of the concentration camp in Dachau. They suffered high casualties and won numerous citations for bravery.

In 1943, the government began drafting the internees into the army. Some refused to join, mostly because of their anger about their confinement, their belief that the government didn't consider them true citizens, or their obligations to their family in the camps.

Seven leaders of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee were arrested for conspiracy to encourage draft resistance. Sixty-three others in Heart Mountain were convicted of draft resistance and sentenced to three years in prison. Draft resisters at other camps held demonstrations and strikes. Some internees protested by giving up their American citizenship.

"You have to laud the ones who stood up for their rights," Buddy says. "But the veterans said that if everyone resisted, Japanese Americans would look disloyal. You have to laud them too."

In 1947, President Truman pardoned 282 draft resisters, but that didn't end the controversy. "It's like the war in Viet Nam," Buddy says. "It still divides Japanese Americans today."

The last camp closed in 1946. Altogether, more than 1,860 internees died, including four who were killed by American soldiers. In the United States, ten Caucasians were convicted of spying for Japan, but not one Japanese.

"After the war, our parents told us over and over, "There's no sense crying over spilt milk. You can't be angry or you'll never move forward." Instead, they told us to get an education, work hard and be model citizens.

"Sometimes I still get angry," Buddy says. "But I think their way has worked. You can't demand respect. You have to earn it."

When Buddy graduated from university, he began working for Hughes Aircraft Company as an electrical engineer. It took a year for him to get his security clearance. When the personnel department found out he'd been in a camp during the war, they assumed he must have done something to deserve it, he says.

At work, he spoke up against discrimination. "Whenever I heard someone in management say Asians couldn't do this or that, or they weren't management material, I always told them to let me try." Buddy laughs. "I was pretty confident by then. And whenever I heard someone stereotyping or using racial or ethnic slurs, I'd stand up and say, "Sir, did I hear you right?""

Buddy created Hughes' affirmative action plan, which gave all qualified employees the opportunities white men had.

Now, as a docent at the museum, he tells visitors, "You have an obligation, a responsibility as a citizen, to speak up whenever you see someone being picked on. No one did it for us. We all have the right to be respected for who we are."