

The NISEI Problem

The government has checked and double-checked these citizens of Jap descent, but some West Coast neighbors don't want them to come home.

By Pvt. JAMES P. O'NEILL

YANK Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES, CALIF.—Out in California's bronze, sage-covered Owens Valley, a couple of hundred miles northeast of Los Angeles, lies a cluster of tar-papered barracks so much resembling an Army base from a distance that the approaching visitor half expects to see a batch of dust-caked rookies shuffling around in a vague approximation of close-order drill.

This is no military base; it is the Manzanar War Relocation Center, one of 10 such installations set up in 1942 following an emergency order issued by the Army, compelling all persons of Japanese ancestry living within 200 miles of the Pacific Coast to move out of the area and, by later presidential ruling, into segregation centers.

The order was considered imperative at the time because Japan, right after Pearl Harbor, held the upper hand in the Pacific, and the Army, facing a threat of invasion, felt obliged to take any and all steps to guard the nation's safety in time of peril. Last January, however, the Army decided that the Japs had been sufficiently whipped to make the segregation of persons with Japanese blood in their veins no longer necessary, and the emergency order was revoked.



Pvt. Noboru N. Kaneko (third from left), a Japanese-American, with three other hospitalized GIs. Kaneko, born in Hawaii, fought with the 34th division in Italy and was wounded near Cassino. With him are S/Sgt. Lloyd A. Taylor of Sixth Air Force; S/Sgt. Harry J. Swartz, Pacific veteran, and Pvt. Manuel R. Costello, Fifth Army.

THE NISEI PROBLEM

At that time there were 112,000 Japanese-Americans confined in the 10 camps. The singular fact is that in June, five months after the people in the camps had been enthusiastically encouraged to leave, only 57,000 of the 112,000 had chosen to do so; the remaining 55,000 were sitting pat, preparing to remain where they were—behind barbed wire.

This seemingly peculiar attitude doesn't mean that the average Japanese-American is any happier than the next man about living in barracks. What it does mean is that many of the 55,000 Japanese-Americans who have stayed on in the relocation centers in preference to regaining their liberty are afraid of the treatment they'll get at the hands of their former neighbors if they leave the protection of their camps. It is a situation that has been creating a headache for officials in Washington and on the West Coast for the past several months.

Takeyoshi Arikawa, a former produce dealer of Los Angeles, is one of the Japanese-Americans at Manzanar who has felt it best to stay put. Recently, seated with some members of his family in one of the bare little apartments into which the Manzanar barracks have been partitioned, he explained his point of view. "I would like to take my people back home," he said, "but there are too many people in Los Angeles who would resent our return. These are troubled times for America. Why should I cause this country any more trouble?"

Arikawa's dilemma would seem awkward enough if he spoke only as a Japanese-born American, loyal to the country of his adoption but inevitably suspect until proved innocent because we are now at war with his native land. However, what complicates a rational approach to Arikawa's case, which is similar to hundreds of other cases, is the fact that he has three sons in the Army, all volunteers. Rather, it should be said he *had* three sons in the Army; one, Frank Arikawa, was killed in action in Italy on July 6, 1944. The other two were fighting right up to VE-Day with the 442d Regimental Combat Team, an outfit that made a distinguished name for itself in Italy, France and Germany and was rewarded by a Presidential citation.

Old Takeyoshi Arikawa is an *Issei*, meaning that he is a Japanese born in Japan and, as such, can never under our present laws become an American citizen. His sons, having been born in the States of Japanese parents, are called *Nisei*. Like the Arikawa boys, many other *Nisei* GIs have turned in outstanding performances in this war. The 442d, for instance, is composed entirely of *Nisei*, and so is the 100th Infantry Battalion, which also fought in Italy, France and Germany and won a Presidential citation. It reads:

The fortitude and intrepidity displayed by the officers and men of the 100th Battalion reflect the finest traditions of the Army of the United States.

Takeyoshi Arikawa, as noted, feels "there are too many people in Los Angeles who would resent our return." Naturally, from his point of



(Image added)

view, if only one person felt resentful to the point of violence that would be "too many," whereas events in recent months have demonstrated that there are a considerable number of persons on the West Coast who don't want

THE NISEI PROBLEM

the Japanese-Americans to return and who are of the type that will resort to strong-arm methods to prevent it.

How large a proportion of the population out this way feels competent to take the law into its own hands is anybody's guess but, judging by a recent



statement on the subject by Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, the group, although beligerently active, is not large.

After announcing that during four months on the West Coast there had been 24 incidents of violence and intimidation against persons of Japanese descent by "hoodlums" operating on "a pattern of planned terrorism," Ickes said: "It is a matter of national concern because this lawless minority whose actions are condemned by the decent citizens who make up an overwhelming majority of West Coast residents seems determined to employ its Nazi storm-trooper tactics against loyal Japanese-Americans and law-abiding Japanese aliens in spite of state laws and Constitutional safeguards designed to protect the lives and property of all the people of this country."

Then, paying tribute to the *Nisei* who at the moment were engaged in fighting the Japs in the Philippines and on Okinawa, Ickes needled the self-appointed West Coast vigilantes in the spot it probably hurt most. "They," he said, referring to the *Nisei* GIs, "are far more in the American tradition than the race-baiters fighting a private war safely at home."

Here may be a few of the reasons why so many *Issei* and not a few *Nisei* continue to believe that they're better off in concentration camps: In Placer County, Calif., a gang led by an AWOL Army private named Elmer R. Johnson dynamited a fruit-packing shed owned by a Japanese-American and fired shotguns into a *Nisei* farmer's home. Johnson, it came out, had gone over the hill after being slated for overseas duty.

Then there was the case of two *Nisei* soldiers on furlough who were stoned while passing through Parker, Calif., on their way to visit a relocation center at Poston, Ariz. And in Poston itself, a discharged *Nisei* veteran was thrown out of a barber shop. He probably was foolish to enter the establishment in the first place, since there was a sign in the window reading, "Keep Out, Japs, You Rats," but he may have believed that his seven decorations (one of them a Purple Heart), plus the fact that he was crippled, entitled him to a little consideration.

In the light of such incidents it would not be strange if the Japanese-Americans who were huddled in the safety of their segregation camps merely shrugged their shoulders when told that two American Legion posts on the West Coast had refused to place the names of *Nisei* GIs on their Second World War memorials.

Conceivably, the people responsible for such acts are motivated by continued fears of espionage and sabotage. If such is the case, however, it is clear on the basis of the record that their

THE NISEI PROBLEM

fears are about as little grounded in fact as were the hysterics over witches in New England back in the 17th century. All the Japanese-Americans during their stay in segregation camps have been questioned in detail concerning their knowledge of the Japanese language, the number of trips (if any) they had made to Japan, the identity of their Japanese relatives, their religious affiliations and their financial interests.

As the Army said when it told the Japanese-Americans that they could leave the camps: "These people are the most carefully scrutinized minority in America." Compared with the dope the Government has on each Japanese-American it sets free, the average GI's 201 card contains about as much information as a laundry ticket.

Few people in the Midwest, East or South know much about Japanese-Americans; many of them have never even seen a Nisei. Although the Japanese started immigrating to the States away back in 1869, few have ever strayed far from the West Coast, where the majority of them have shown a strong clannish spirit.

Talking the other day with a West Coast man who plainly didn't care a great deal for his Japanese-American neighbors, I asked him what grudges he and his friends had against them. "Oh, hell," he replied, irritably. "Those people breed like rabbits. There's at least a million of them out here on the West Coast. They use human manure as fertilizer on their farms. They stick to themselves and they're all agents of Japan. Why, just look where they live—right next to some of our biggest naval bases. . . ."

Government officials say that most of these accusations are way off base. The Japanese-Americans, I learned, do not breed like rabbits; on the contrary, from 1930 to 1940 the number of persons of Japanese ancestry in the U. S. slumped nearly 9 percent. Far from there being a million Japanese-Americans on the West Coast, at the time of Pearl Harbor there were only 127,000 of them in the whole U. S., and no more, of course, have come in since. Japanese-Americans who farm do not use human manure as fertilizer and are, instead, considered by agricultural experts to be as progressive and scientific as any farmers on the Pacific Coast.

ON the other hand, I was told, there's no denying that in the past plenty of Japanese-Americans have lived near important naval bases. Most of them were legitimate fishermen living, along with other legitimate fishermen of Portuguese, Italian and Mexican extraction, in centers like Terminal Island at San Pedro. Whether or not all the Japanese-Americans had good reasons for living where they did, the fact remains that since Pearl Harbor there hasn't been a single case of sabotage of any significance on the West Coast. What's more, high-ranking Naval Intelligence officers say that Japanese-Americans have been among their best informants on enemy activity.

Life is not easy for those Japanese-Americans who have ventured back to their old homes on the Coast, although when I visited a few of them not long ago I found them for the most part hopeful, if not entirely happy. The first place I stopped at was the farm of Mr. and Mrs. Hitoshi Nitta, a few miles outside of Santa Ana, Calif. The Nittas were married while both were interned in the Colorado River Relocation Center and now have a year-old son. The husband, a graduate of the California Polytechnic Institute, has a temporary deferment from his draft board so that he can get the farm in shape, after which he plans to enter the Army and leave his 62-year-old father to carry on. Both Mr. and Mrs. Nitta are natives of Santa Ana and belong to the

THE NISEI PROBLEM



Yoshio Nakado, 28, a U. S. citizen, left his farm in California to join the Army.



Takeysohi Arikawa sits in the Manzanar Relocation Center with his wife and young son John. His son Frank was killed in action in Italy.

The Nittas were married while both were interned in the Colorado River Relocation Center and now have a year-old son. The husband, a graduate of the California Polytechnic Institute, has a temporary deferment from his draft board so that he can get the farm in shape, after which he plans to enter the Army and leave his 62-year-old father to carry on. Both Mr. and Mrs. Nitta are natives of Santa Ana and belong to the Methodist Church there.

Nitta's wife, Mary, a graduate of the University of Southern California, has a brother, Pvt. Eichi Yamagata, who served in France with the 442d. She told me that she and her husband had been warmly welcomed back to Santa Ana by neighbors who had known them all their lives, including Mrs. Roy Corry, whose son, Lt. Roy Corry Jr., was killed on Guadalcanal. However, she said, some johnnies-come-lately to the community had been less cordial.

"The first day we were home," she explained, "a group of people dropped by in two cars. They told us we'd better get out of Santa Ana or there'd be trouble. We listened to them, but we didn't say anything and we didn't leave." The next day, Mrs. Nitta went on, two more groups called with the same warning, and then a few days after that a nondescript character who had once worked on a nearby farm dropped in. He reminded the Nittas that he was a "friend" of theirs and told them that most of the people in Santa Ana resented the couple's return.

THE NISEI PROBLEM

"There's a mob getting together tonight," he said, "and they plan to come out and shoot the place up." Nitta notified the police and a deputy sheriff was sent out to the farm, but nothing happened. That was the last time the couple were bothered.

"I don't believe the majority of the people want us to leave," Mrs. Nitta said. "They've had lots of chances to show their feelings about us. I go into town shopping at least once a day and everyone has been very nice to me. I think they're being nice because they want to be. With the situation the way it is in some places, they certainly don't have to be hypocritical about it."

Her husband agreed. "I had to get some parts for a tractor," he said, "and getting parts these days is pretty tough, but by running around between half a dozen firms I managed to get most of them. They were all cooperative and willing to help out. My dad and I had traded with most of them before the war. However, there was one fellow who said he wouldn't do business with a Japanese but would give me what I wanted if I'd send around a Mexican who works on the farm. I said, 'No thanks.' "

Nitta was upset about the death of Lt. Corry. "Roy was one of my best friends," he said. "We went to the same school and played softball together. I feel as bad about Roy's death as I do about some of my Nisei friends who've been killed in France. When my deferment is up, I'm going into the Army. I'll be proud to be an American soldier with a chance to fight for my country. You can't blame people for hating the enemy of our country, Japan. But I'm an American. Mrs. Corry, who has known me since I was a kid, understands that and so do my other Caucasian friends. Someday, I think the rest of the country will, too."

I also stopped by at the ten-acre farm of 62-year-old Ginzo Nakada, who lives with his crippled wife, Kagi, and four minor children just outside Covina, Calif. At his age, Nakada doesn't view life as cheerfully as the Nittas do. In addition to the kids at home, he has seven sons in the Army, two of them with the 442d overseas. Nakada finds it tough supporting his family on his 10 acres, especially since he has few implements to help him with the task. The Government requisitioned his tractor and some other equipment, and what the Government didn't requisition, vandals stole.

"It took me quite a while to build this place so that I could make a living for my family," Nakada told me. "Now I'm almost back to where I started 40 years ago. When the war is over and my sons come back I ought to be able to make things run again, but right now, with the war and so little to work with and the way people feel these days, it's hard. But we'll see."

NAKADA showed me a letter from Pfc. Saburo Nakada, one of his sons in Europe. It struck a brighter note. In it, young Nakada boasted about the citation his outfit had received, asked for a fountain pen, told about getting a pfc stripe after three years in the Army, and wound up by writing: "Guys in other outfits treat us swell and the division we're working with is damn proud of us. Don't worry too much about going home to Covina. I think now the people will understand." Old Ginzo Nakada hopes they will.