

ACT Reading - WWII - Yuri Kochiyama “Then Came the War” (1991)

Background

The Japanese-American civil rights activist, feminist, and author Yuri Kochiyama was born and raised in San Pedro, California. She and her family were among the 120,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast who were rounded up in a wave of anti-Japanese hysteria that followed the bombing of Pearl Harbor. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, giving the army the power — without warrants, indictments, or hearings — to arrest all Japanese Americans (three-fourths of them children born in the United States and therefore citizens), take them from their homes, transport them to camps far into the interior, and keep them there under prison conditions. The Supreme Court upheld this on grounds of military necessity. Not until the 1980s did the federal courts concede that a wrong had been committed. Yuri Kochiyama describes here the conditions in the detention camps.

Speech

Yuri Kochiyama “Then Came the War” (1991)

I was red, white and blue when I was growing up. I taught Sunday school, and was very, very American. But I was also very provincial. We were just kids rooting for our high school.

I was nineteen at the time of the evacuation. I had just finished junior college. I was looking for a job, and didn't realize how different the school world was from the work world. In the school world, I never felt racism. But when you got into the work world, it was very difficult. This was 1941, just before the war. I finally did get a job at a department store. But for us back then, it was a big thing, because I don't think they had ever hired an Asian in a department store before. I tried, because I saw a Mexican friend who got a job there.

Everything changed for me on the day Pearl Harbor was bombed. On that very day — December 7, the FBI came and they took my father. He had just come home from the hospital the day before. For several days we didn't know where they had taken him. Then we found out that he was taken to the federal prison at Terminal Island. Overnight, things changed for us. They took all men who lived near the Pacific waters, and had anything to do with fishing. A month later, they took every fisherman from Terminal Island, sixteen and over, to places — not the regular concentration camps — but to detention centers in places like South

Dakota, Montana, and New Mexico. They said that all Japanese who had given money to any kind of Japanese organization would have to be taken away. At that time, many people were giving to the Japanese Red Cross. The first group was thirteen hundred Isseis — my parent's generation. They took those who were leaders of the community, or Japanese school teachers, or were teaching martial arts, or who were Buddhist priests. Those categories which would make them very “Japanesey,” were picked up. This really made a tremendous impact on our lives. My twin brother was going to the University at Berkeley. He came rushing back. All of our classmates were joining up, so he volunteered to go into the service. And it seemed strange that here they had my father in prison, and

there the draft board okayed my brother. He went right into the army. My other brother, who was two years older, was trying to run my father's fish market. But business was already going down, so he had to close it. He had finished college at the University of California a couple of years before.

They took my father on December 7th. The day before, he had just come home from the hospital. He had surgery for an ulcer. We only saw him once on December 13. On December 20th they said he could come home. By the time they brought him back, he couldn't talk. He made guttural sounds and we didn't know if he could hear. He was home for twelve hours. He was dying. The next morning, when we got up, they told us that he was gone. He was very sick. And I think the interrogation was very rough. My mother kept begging the authorities to let him go to the hospital until he was well, then put him back in the prison. They did finally put him there, a week or so later. But they put him in a hospital where they were bringing back all these American Merchant Marines who were hit on Wake Island. So he was the only Japanese in that hospital, so they hung a sheet around him that said. Prisoner of War. The feeling where he was was very bad.

You could see the hysteria of war. There was a sense that war could actually come to American shores. Everybody was yelling to get the "Japs" out of California. In Congress, people were speaking out. Organizations such as the Sons and Daughters of the Golden West were screaming "Get the 'Japs' out." So were the real estate people, who wanted to get the land from the Japanese farmers. The war had whipped up such a hysteria that if there was anyone for the Japanese, you didn't hear about it. I'm sure they were afraid to speak out, because they would be considered not only just "Jap" lovers, but unpatriotic.

Just the fact that my father was taken made us suspect to people. But on the whole, the neighbors were quite nice, especially the ones adjacent to us. There was already a six a.m. to six p.m. curfew and a five mile limit on where we could go from our homes. So they offered to do our shopping for us, if we needed.

Most Japanese Americans had to give up their jobs, whatever they did, and were told they had to leave. The edict for 9066 — President Roosevelt's edict for evacuation — was in February 1942. We were moved to a detention center that April. By then the Japanese on Terminal Island were just helter skelter, looking for anywhere they could go. They opened up the Japanese school and Buddhist churches, and families just crowded in. Even farmers brought along their chickens and chicken coops. They just opened up the places for people to stay until they could figure out what to do. Some people left for Colorado and Utah. Those who had relatives could do so. The idea was to evacuate all the Japanese from the coast. But all the money was frozen, so even if you knew where you wanted to go, it wasn't that simple. By then, people knew they would be going into camps, so they were selling what they could, even though they got next to nothing for it.

We were sent to an assembly center in Arcadia, California, in April. It was the largest assembly center on the West Coast having nearly twenty thousand people. There were some smaller centers with about six hundred people. All along the West Coast — Washington, Oregon, California — there were many, many assembly centers, but ours was the largest. Most of the assembly centers were either fairgrounds, or race tracks. So

many of us lived in stables and they said you could take what you could carry. We were there until October.

Even though we stayed in a horse stable, everything was well organized. Every unit would hold four to six people. So in some cases, families had to split up, or join others. We slept on army cots, and for mattresses they gave us muslin bags, and told us to fill them with straw. And for chairs, everybody scrounged around for carton boxes, because they could serve as chairs. You could put two together and it could be a little table. So it was just makeshift. But I was amazed how, in a few months, some of those units really looked nice. Japanese women fixed them up. Some people had the foresight to bring material and needles and thread. But they didn't let us bring anything that could be used as weapons. They let us have spoons, but no knives. For those who had small children or babies, it was rough. They said you could take what you could carry. Well, they could only take their babies in their arms, and maybe the little children could carry something, but it was pretty limited.

I was so red, white and blue, I couldn't believe this was happening to us. America would never do a thing like this to us. This is the greatest country in the world. So I thought this is only going to be for a short while, maybe a few weeks or something, and they will let us go back. At the beginning no one realized how long this would go on. I didn't feel the anger that much because I thought maybe this was the way we could show our love for our country, and we should not make too much fuss or noise, we should abide by what they asked of us. I'm a totally different person now than I was back then. I was naive about so many things. The more I think about, the more I realize how little you learn about American history. It's just what they want you to know.

At the beginning, we didn't have any idea how temporary or permanent the situation was. We thought we would be able to leave shortly. But after several months they told us this was just temporary quarters, and they were building more permanent quarters elsewhere in the United States. All this was so unbelievable. A year before we would never have thought anything like this could have happened to us — not in this country. As time went by, the sense of frustration grew. Many families were already divided. The fathers, the heads of the households, were taken to other camps. In the beginning, there was no way for the sons to get in touch with their families. Before our group left for the detention camp, we were saying goodbye almost every day to other groups who were going to places like Arizona

and Utah. Here we finally had made so many new friends — people who we met, lived with, shared the time, and gotten to know. So it was even sad on that note and the goodbyes were difficult. Here we had gotten close to these people, and now we had to separate again. I don't think we even thought about where they were going to take us, or how long we would have to stay there. When we got on the trains to leave for the camps, we didn't know where we were going. None of the groups knew. It was later on that we learned so and so ended up in Arizona, or Colorado, or some other place. We were all at these assembly centers for about seven months. Once they started pushing people out, it was done very quickly. By October, our group headed out for Jerome, Arkansas, which is on the Tex-Arkana corner.

When we got to Jerome, Arkansas, we were shocked because we had never seen an area like it. There was forest all around us. And they told us to wait till the rains hit. This would not only turn into mud, but Arkansas swamp lands. That's where they put us — in swamp lands, surrounded by forests. It was nothing like California.

I'm speaking as a person of twenty who had good health. Up until then, I had lived a fairly comfortable life. But there were many others who didn't see the whole experience the same way. Especially those who were older and in poor health and had experienced racism. One more thing like this could break them. I was at an age where transitions were not hard; the point where anything new could even be considered exciting. But for people in poor health, it was hell.

There were army-type barracks, with two hundred to two hundred and five people to each block and every block had its own mess hall, facility for washing clothes, showering. It was all surrounded by barbed wire, and armed soldiers. I think they said only seven people were killed in total, though thirty were shot, because they went too close to the fence...

When we first arrived, there were some things that weren't completely fixed. For instance, the roofers would come by, and everyone would hunger for information from the outside world. We wanted to know what was happening with the war. We weren't allowed to bring radios; that was contraband. And there were no televisions then. So we would ask the workers to bring us back some papers, and they would give us papers from Texas or Arkansas, so for the first time we would find out about news from the outside. Just before we went in to the camps, we saw that being a Japanese wasn't such a good thing, because everybody was turning against the Japanese, thinking we were saboteurs, or linking us with Pearl Harbor. But when I saw the kind of work they did at camp, I felt so proud of the Japanese, and proud to be Japanese, and wondered why I was so white, white when I was outside, because I was always with white folks. Many people had brothers or sons who were in the military and Japanese American servicemen would come into the camp to visit the families, and we felt so proud of them when they came in their uniforms. We knew that it would only be a matter of time before they would be shipped overseas.

We always called the camps "relocation centers" while we were there. Now we feel it is apropos to call them concentration camps. It is not the same as the concentration camps of Europe; those we feel were death camps. Concentration camps were a concentration of people placed in an area, and disempowered and disenfranchised. So it is apropos to call what I was in a concentration camp. After two years in the camp, I was released.

I returned in October of 1945. It was very hard to find work, at least for me. I wasn't expecting to find anything good, just something to tie me over until my boyfriend came back from New York. The only thing I was looking for was to work in a restaurant as a waitress. But I couldn't find anything. I would walk from one end of the town to the other, and down every main avenue. But as soon as they found out I was Japanese, they would say no. Or they would ask me if I was in the union, and of course I couldn't be in the union because I had just gotten there. Anyway, no Japanese could be in the union, so if the answer was no I'm not in the union, they would say no. So finally what I did was

go into the rough area of San Pedro — there's a strip near the wharf — and I went down there. I was determined to keep the jobs as long as I could. But for a while, I could last maybe two hours, and somebody would say "Is that a 'Jap?'" And as soon as someone would ask that, the boss would say, "Sorry, you gotta go. We don't want trouble here."

Historically, Americans have always been putting people behind walls. First there were the American Indians who were put on reservations, Africans in slavery, their lives on the plantations, Chicanos doing migratory work, and the kinds of camps they lived in, and even too, the Chinese when they worked on the railroad camps where they were almost isolated, dispossessed people — disempowered. And I feel those are the things we should fight against so they won't happen again. It wasn't so long ago — in 1979 — that the feeling against the Iranians was so strong because of the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Iran, where they wanted to deport Iranian students. And that is when a group called Concerned Japanese Americans organized, and that was the first issue we took up, and then we connected it with what the Japanese had gone through. This whole period of what the Japanese went through is important. If we can see the connections of how often this happens in history, we can stem the tide of these things happening again by speaking out against them.

Further Readings

<https://www.yurikochiyama.com/>

<https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/yuri-kochiyama-then-came-the-war/>

Our Own People - NPR - <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/29/982274384/our-own-people>

Questions

1. What does the author reveal about their initial perception of the American government's actions during the evacuation?
 - a. Complete disbelief
 - b. Blind trust
 - c. Mild skepticism
 - d. Anger and protest
2. According to the passage, why did the author's twin brother volunteer for military service after the evacuation?
 - a. To escape the discrimination faced by their family
 - b. To prove his loyalty to the United States
 - c. To follow in the footsteps of their classmates
 - d. To challenge the government's actions
3. Why did the authorities label the author's father as a "Prisoner of War" in the hospital?
 - a. To highlight his affiliation with Japanese organizations
 - b. To deter other prisoners from interacting with him
 - c. To emphasize the severity of his condition
 - d. To comply with wartime policies
4. How did the author initially react to the relocation to the assembly center in Arcadia, California?
 - a. Indifference
 - b. Disbelief
 - c. Anger
 - d. Acceptance
5. What is the author's attitude toward the assembly center conditions?
 - a. Resigned acceptance
 - b. Bitter resentment
 - c. Enthusiastic approval
 - d. Shock and disbelief
6. How did the author and others in the camp receive news about the outside world?
 - a. Radios provided by the authorities
 - b. Newspapers from nearby towns
 - c. Workers bringing back papers
 - d. Televisions available in common areas
7. What changed the author's perception of being Japanese while in the camp?
 - a. Discrimination faced by Japanese Americans
 - b. The work ethic and pride of Japanese individuals
 - c. The visit of Japanese American servicemen
 - d. Recognition of their cultural heritage
8. How does the author view the camps, referring to them as "relocation centers"?
 - a. Positive and justified
 - b. Neutral and pragmatic

- c. Critical and sarcastic
- d. Indifferent and detached

9. According to the author, what historical pattern does the internment of Japanese Americans connect to?
- a. Discrimination against Native Americans
 - b. Slavery of Africans
 - c. Mistreatment of Chicanos
 - d. All of the above
10. What lesson does the author draw from the experience of Japanese Americans during World War II?
- a. The need for stronger immigration policies
 - b. The importance of unity in times of crisis
 - c. The potential dangers of historical amnesia
 - d. The justification for wartime internment camps