

THE BOOK REPORT

Japanese-Americans at Camp

BY ROBERT KIRSCH

Times Book Critic

Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps by Michi Weglyn (Morrow; \$10.95; illustrated)

The people were taken in their tens of thousands from their homes and towns. But first they had experienced some preliminary steps: Their bank accounts were frozen, their homes raided, their travel severely limited, curfews imposed. They were registered, given numbers, told to assemble with bedrolls and no more baggage than could be carried by hand. They were given a few days to dispose of possessions and wind up their affairs. They lost land, businesses, household goods.

The wholesale evacuation and imprisonment of Japanese-Americans from the West Coast in 1942 has produced some memoirs and a few scholarly studies but in general the story has been muted, rationalized by the panic situation of post Pearl Harbor and in the desire of most Issei and Nisei to forget. Their grandchildren and children, the Sansei, are not so disposed to cover up the traumatic experience. They are more activist, more determined to reembrace a cultural identity once challenged by their parents' desire for assimilation.

Michi Weglyn, who spent a part of her adolescence in the Gila camp, Arizona, believes all the whole story must be told uncompromisingly. ". . . I, like others, went along into confinement, trusting that our revered President in his great wisdom and discernment had found the measure was in the best interest of our country . . . In an inexplicable spirit of atonement and with great sadness, we went with our parents to concentration camps," she writes.

Twenty-five years later she began to find disquieting documents which threw doubt on official explanations, began to trace the injustices compounded, the delayed effects of this experience. It is a narrative often painful to read, revealing flaws in some of our political heroes, such as Earl Warren, and reporting the crusades of such as Wayne Collins, who fought for years to remedy the injustices suffered by those internees pressured into renouncing their citizenship.

Californians, particularly, cannot read this story as some remote record of the past, but all Americans will recognize in these pages the warning this book eloquently provides. Rights are fragile against the exploding passions of hysteria and fear. It is no accident that the final note in the book quotes the words of Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes:

"You may think the Constitution is your security—it is nothing but a piece of paper. You may think the statutes are your security—they are nothing but words in a book. You may think the elaborate mechanism of government is your security—it is nothing at all, unless you have sound and uncorrupted public opinion to give life to your Constitution, to give vitality to your statutes, to make efficient your government machinery."

Among the many surprises in this unsparing account is that both Naval Intelligence and the FBI had opposed President Roosevelt's decision for evacuation. Their surveillance of the Japanese minority had persuaded them that the overwhelming majority of Japanese living in America were loyal to this country and represented no threat. A special report, ordered by President Roosevelt in October, 1941, as many signs showed a rapid approach of war, was carried out by Curtis B. Munson of the State Department. It corroborated the conclusion of the intelligence services and "certified a remarkable, even extraordinary degree of loyalty among this generally suspect ethnic group."

In the interests of propaganda, the Munson report was suppressed and did not come to light until the Pearl Harbor hearings of 1946. Thus there is evidence not only of a credibility gap but of the deliberate exploitation of prejudice and fear to dampen resistance to evacuation. The tiny Japanese minority (1% of the state's population) became the scapegoat; no one seriously suggested internment of Italian or German-Americans.

Hindsight may not evoke the whole reality of the time and place. It seems convincing that the climate for a mass uprooting was substantially orchestrated by most government officials and politicians and by the Army commanders involved. Earl Warren's assertions that the Japanese had "infiltrated themselves into every strategic spot in our coastal and valley counties," his racist argument that "when we are dealing with the Caucasian race we have methods that will test the loyalty of them . . . But when we deal with the Japanese we are in an entirely different field and we cannot form any opinion that we believe to be sound," not only appealed to the biased but must have helped convince hundreds of thousands of open-minded Californians that there was some danger.

Michi Weglyn does not write out of a vindictive spirit, though her book is likely to be viewed by some Japanese-Americans as a knife in old wounds. A few may challenge her selection or interpretation of accounts of experiences in the camps or in resettlement or in the effects—sometimes delayed—on individual and family lives "so cataclysmically disarranged." But she pursues every aspect of the story—including the usually slighted Tule Lake experiences, the long legal battles for vindication and restoration of citizenship, the efforts of Nisei groups such as the Japanese-American Citizens League to learn from the experience, the conflicts which still exist within the community and between generations.

Michi Weglyn believes that after the pain of reopening wounds, witnesses feel as though "a terrible burden had been lifted." Warren Futani, who leads some Sansei and Yonsei (fourth generation) activists, speaks of his experience with the older generation: "You talk to people and they start sitting down and tears start trickling down their cheeks—that's how important that thing was."