

# The Issei, the Nisei and Us

By JOHN L. HESS

**YEARS OF INFAMY: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps.** By Michi Weglyn, with introduction by James A. Michener. 341 pages. Illustrated, William Morrow & Company. \$10.95.

There is a rumble on the right that says Americans are tired of self-flagellation. A front-running candidate pledges that he won't mention Watergate during the campaign, and he may be relied upon not to belabor Vietnam, either. For the moment, that would appear to be paying off in the primaries; whether it is the best way to

avoid new Watergates and new Vietnams is another question. Well, here is the story of another national crime, the wartime incarceration of 120,000 of our fellows because of their Japanese origin. It is a fascinating and shattering story, which no American who loves his country should ignore. Michiko Nishiyuro was a California teen-ager in February 1942



Dick Marshall  
Michi Weglyn

when President Roosevelt banished her to a concentration camp. Now Michi Weglyn, a costume designer, she recalls in "Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps": "I believed, as did numerous Japanese Americans, that somehow the stain of dishonor we collectively felt for the treachery of Pearl Harbor must be eradicated, however great the sacrifice, however little we were responsible for it. In our immaturity and naïveté, many of us who were American citizens—two-thirds of the total—believed that this, under the circumstances, was the only way to prove our loyalty to a country which we loved."

The country did not requite this love. Earl Warren, who was then Attorney General of California and soon would become Governor, called for evacuation of "those admittedly American-hating Japs." He meant all of them. "There is more potential danger among the group of Japanese who were born in this country than from alien Japanese who were born in Japan," he declared.

James A. Michener notes in an angry introduction that the White House has assigned Curtis B. Munson, a State Department aide, to explore just this problem in the months before Pearl Harbor. In agreement with Navy Intelligence, which had been keeping an eye on the Japanese community for years, Mr. Munson reported: "There is no Japanese problem on the Coast."

But following the Japanese attack, the President yielded to a clamor from West Coast interests, from the press and from politicians such as Representative John Rankin, who declaimed: "I'm for catching every Japanese in America, Alaska and Hawaii now and putting them in concentration camps . . . Damn them! Let's get rid of them!"

But the 150,000 Hawaiians of Japanese origin, although they occupied a far more strategic outpost, were found too important to the islands' economy to be spared, and only a relatively few suspects were sent to the mainland for internment. The resistance of local authorities to the panic in Washington paid off; there was no sabotage, and Nisei troops played an extraordinary role in combat.

Mr. Michener argues that envy of the prosperity of the Japanese farmers on the Coast played a major role in their expulsion. A much larger factor, as he and Mrs. Weglyn make clear, was racial prejudice. In October 1942 Secretary of State Cordell Hull advised F.D.R. that it was necessary to deport to the United States "all Japanese" and "all the dangerous Germans and Italians." Later, the President assured Italian American leaders that internment of Italian and German aliens would be limited and selective, unlike that of the Japanese.

Earl Warren had explained that one could test the loyalty of a Caucasian, but not that of an Oriental. So the aged Issei (born in Japan and hence barred from naturalization), were shipped off to camps with their American-born children, the Nisei, and with the Sansai, the babies of the Nisei.

The evacuation and internment were a bungled mess that detracted from the war effort and shattered the lives of many of its victims. Conditions were never comparable to the German death trains and murder camps, but some of the tragic symptoms of captivity and rejection are recounted here; there were rebels and terrorists, informers and collaborators. In confusion and bitterness, some remained patriotic Americans who volunteered for suicide combat teams to prove their loyalty. Others prayed for a Japanese victory. Grievances led to riots and bloodshed.

Absurdly, the authorities began to poll the Japanese Americans on their loyalty after they had been stripped of their possessions and interned. Toward the end, confused about their situation, fearing that they would be mobbed by Californians if they returned home, some 10,000 renounced their citizenship. Many were sent to Japan immediately after the war. It took 14 years of dedicated struggle, led by the San Francisco lawyer Wayne M. Collins, to regain full citizenship for the survivors.

There were some heroes: Mr. Collins, Harold Ickes, Norman Thomas, the Northern California section of the American Civil Liberties Union (though not the national office), the Quakers, a few other good Samaritans—or should we say, good Germans? There were, sadly, rather more villains, and among them many of the best and brightest of that time.

They are named in this extraordinary history. Mrs. Weglyn, who was a victim, tells it with sober restraint; Mr. Michener, who was not, permits himself the relief of anger. We should all be angry, not least about ourselves. It has been said of the Germans that only the innocent feel guilty. We had better all feel guilty for, as Mrs. Weglyn warns, "They who say that it can never happen again are probably wrong."