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BOOK REVIEW

DESERT EXILE: THE UPROOTING OF A JAPANESE AMERICAN FAMILY.
BY YOSHIKO UCHIDA.* UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS, 1982. ILLUS.
PP. 160. \$12.95.

Reviewed by Harold Baer, Jr.**

The uprooting of the Japanese community following Pearl Harbor has become a subject of current interest even though it occurred more than forty years ago. Only recently, two members of Congress, Norman Y. Mineta and Robert T. Matsui, both Democrats of California, have expressed their interest in the issue, which they suggest may be the most important civil rights issue of the 98th Congress. In addition, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, created by President Carter in 1981, recently published a report concluding that the detention and relocation of 120,000 American citizens during World War II was a "grave injustice."¹

Congress is conducting formal hearings on a \$1.5 billion proposal that would provide a formal national apology and grant \$20,000 to each of the estimated 60,000 surviving victims of the internment and establish a special educational foundation for Japanese-Americans.² This proposal has created much debate and disagreement.

John J. McCloy, President Roosevelt's Assistant Secretary of War, argues that the American taxpayer should not "pay for the consequences of an indisputable act of aggression by Japan."³ Similarly, The Conference of Governors concluded, at its most recent meeting in Portland, Maine, that the United States owes an apology to the Japanese-Americans, but should not pay any money to those who were interned.⁴

It is a tribute to people such as Ms. Uchida that this issue, long buried, has surfaced and is receiving much attention. Her book, *Desert Exile*, consists of eight chapters and an epilogue basically devoted to how the Japanese who emigrated to California in the early 1900s lived

* The author has a number of other titles to her credit, the majority of which have been children's books.

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1. N.Y. Times, Aug. 12, 1983, at B8, col. 1.
2. S. 1520, 98th Cong., 1st Sess., 129 CONG. REC. 89 (1983).
3. N.Y. Times, Aug. 12, 1983, at B8, col. 3.
4. *Id.*

their lives. The first portion of the book is devoted to the problems of growing up as first generation Americans with parents born and raised in Japan. The first two chapters are reminiscences about the author's parents and what they loved about America and Japan: their interest in Doshisha, a Japanese university; her father's life as a minor executive at Mitsui, a great Japanese trading company (just beginning to make a foothold in the United States); how the family would travel on her father's railroad pass to Los Angeles to be with the author's paternal grandmother; and the great emphasis on religion, which saw the author and her sister in church (the Japanese Independent Congregational Church of Oakland) and Sunday School every weekend and found her father in a variety of roles on behalf of his church. The book is punctuated with *tanka*, a relatively brief but beautiful form of Japanese verse, usually about natural phenomena, at which both of the author's parents were proficient.

The book changes dramatically with Chapter Three, "Pearl Harbor." The balance of this slim volume is devoted to the aftermath of that disaster for the Japanese community in America. The author describes the fear and outrage of returning home on December 8, 1941 to find the FBI in the house; how the FBI or the police had broken in and searched the house without a warrant; and how the FBI took her father, Mr. Uchida, from the house with little or no explanation to his family. She details how her father was interned; how she, her mother and her sister were afraid they might never see him again; and how there were stories that men such as Mr. Uchida might be held as hostages and perhaps even put to death as a reprisal for atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers.

The chapters devoted to the evacuation and resettlement of the Japanese family, complete with photographs, certainly make one wonder where during that period of our history America had stowed the Constitution.

At one point, the author writes in fairly descriptive language about where she, her sister and her parents were quartered and what it was to live there.⁵ We read at page 96:

After three months of communal living, the lack of privacy began to grate on my nerves. There was no place I could go to be completely alone—not in the washroom, the latrine, the shower, or my stall. I couldn't walk down the track without seeing someone I knew. I couldn't avoid the people I didn't like or choose those I wished to be near. There was no place to cry

5. The place she describes was the first camp hurriedly set up at a racetrack in California, before the trek across country to Utah.

and no place to hide. It was impossible to escape from the constant noise and human presence. I felt stifled and suffocated and sometimes wanted to scream. But in my family we didn't scream or cry or fight or even have a major argument, because we knew the neighbors were always only inches away.

The book concludes with a brief discussion of the "escape" by both the author and her sister. Her sister was allowed to leave the camp to come East and run a nursery school at Mt. Holyoke College, and the author was awarded a full fellowship to do graduate work at Smith College. Sadly, the senior Uchidas were forced to stay behind.

The thrust of the book is a narrative of just how new immigrants from Japan, "Issei,"⁶ and first generation Japanese-Americans, "Nisei,"⁷ were treated before, during and, to a lesser degree, after the war. The author's story of America's belated recognition of the loyalty of virtually all Japanese-Americans, and how their recruitment resulted in a much decorated, all-Nisei crack combat team, is worth reading. Unfortunately, it simply adds another, albeit somewhat different, chapter about the breadth of prejudice and segregation in America. It is a little strange to read it from the pen of this author only because Japan has always seemed to me to be a series of islands populated exclusively by Japanese—apparently not even permitting of immigration by a foreign group.

The last paragraph in the epilogue, at page 154, tells the reader why the book was written:

I wrote it for the young Japanese Americans who seek a sense of continuity with their past. But I wrote it as well for all Americans, with the hope that through knowledge of the past, they will never allow another group of people in America to be sent into a desert exile ever again.

Truly, America's youth and many of its older citizens have either forgotten or repressed this dark chapter in American history. A simply written and easily understood book, it provides us all with the knowledge of what happened and the effect it had, if not on each and every one of us, certainly on many of our Japanese-Americans who were interned during World War II. It is worth reading, as the author says, to help insure that, in our democracy at least, it does not happen again.

6. *E.g.*, the author's parents.

7. *E.g.*, the author and her sister.

