

Eyewitness to History: I'm American, No Matter What!

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After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the U.S. Army forcibly rounded up thousands of Japanese Americans from Hawaii and the West Coast and put them in internment camps. Akari interviewed her grandmother, Lilly Yuriko T. Hatanaka, who was 17 years old at the time.

"Get on the bus, Jap!" the guard told 17-year-old Lily Yuriko T. Hatanaka. She boarded the bus worried. "Why is this happening to me?" she wondered. "Stupid Japanese. Stupid government. I'm American, no matter what!"

My grandmother soon became a prisoner at an **internment** camp in Santa Anita, California. An internment camp is similar to a prison, but different. When my grandma first saw the place she would soon call home, she was shocked. "We're going to live here?" she asked her aunt and uncle. They were speechless. It was a horse stall. For about three to four months, my grandma and her family lived in a horse stall near a racetrack.

Then they were sent to Camp 3, in Poston, Arizona, where the living quarters were better. Their camp was not as **bleak**¹ as some. My grandmother's aunt's father, whom my grandmother called Grandpa Otsuka, had brought some seeds and tools. Grandpa Otsuka made benches and furniture for the camp.

Then there were the seeds. Most camps had only the food the Army gave them, and "it wasn't pretty," my grandma said. But because of the seeds, my grandma's camp had crisp, fresh vegetables. "Sweet peas, carrots, tomatoes--even the children who usually hated the

¹**bleak:** cheerless, depressing

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vegetables ate them like it was a feast," my grandma said. "Green plants are pretty when you're a prisoner in the desert."

One of my grandmother's most vivid memories of Camp 3 was a riot between the Nisei and the Kibei. The Nisei were Japanese Americans who were born in the United States. The Kibei were Japanese Americans who went to school in Japan and then returned to the United States. In general, the Kibei opposed those Nisei who joined the U.S. Army to fight.

The Kibei held secret meetings, but somehow my grandma found out about them. She snuck around, trying to find out what the meetings were about. My grandma was lucky nobody caught her. She was also lucky she was not snooping around the night the riot began. The Kibei and Nisei used whatever they could find--for instance, lead pipes from water taps--to hit each other.

They kept fighting each other until the soldiers broke it up. My grandmother also remembers the day when some of the Nisei boarded the bus to join the Army. Many of them were my grandma's friends. As they boarded the bus, they didn't look back, but their eyes said, "Mom, Dad...please remember me."

As the bus roared away, my grandmother became sad. "Many of them did not come back," my grandmother said.

My grandmother said that all the Japanese Americans learned a very important lesson. "Even at internment camp, I was not alone. I made friends and had family. No matter how difficult times are, there is the goodness of people, the beauty of nature around us, and God. No matter how different we are, we are equal. Treat each other with respect and **dignity**², no matter who they are. And remember... I am, and will always be, an American."

²dignity: the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or respected