

# The American Yawp Reader

## Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga on Japanese Internment (1942/1994)

*Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga was born in 1924 in Sacramento, California and moved to Los Angeles at the age of nine. A second-generation (“Nisei”) Japanese American, she was incarcerated at the Manzanar internment camp in California and later at other internment camps in Arkansas. Her she describes learning about Pearl Harbor, her family’s forced evacuation, and her impressions of her internment camp.*

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EO: Do you remember what you were doing when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

AH: When the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, I was at a party of my high school friends, and it was, we were just shocked. It was hard to believe that this had happened. ... The party broke up, we all went home. And I think our parents took it much harder because, as you know, as most — perhaps a lot of people don’t know — that persons of Japanese ancestry who were immigrants were not permitted to become American citizens at that time, in 1942. ... My father and mother had been here a number of years, but by law, they were, could not become naturalized citizens. So, of course, we were concerned as to what would happen to the immigrant parents who were considered aliens. ... We did not think — at least I didn’t, and I think many of us who were second-generation Japanese, *Nisei* — didn’t think much about what would be happening to us. We were concerned about our parents. We thought we were American citizens, therefore we were protected. We were protected by the Constitution to continue to have the freedom, the liberty that we, all Americans have a right to

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EO: And did you go back to school the next day?

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AH: We, as I recall, we did go back to school. Things had changed, though. I think our friends, non-Japanese friends, didn't really know how to treat us. I think they knew that we would be hurt if they ostracized us. On the other hand, just like our neighbors who lived around us, I believe that they felt if they were too friendly with us, they would be labeled "Jap-lovers." ... We were treated with a sort of disdain. I think we were stigmatized simply because of, of our ethnicity. And I think that that's one of the most painful experiences, the feelings about the entire wartime experience. That we were judged, not on our own character as people and persons, but simply because of our ethnicity, something that I think goes against the grain of democracy, of the Constitution and every right and privilege that we're supposed to enjoy as American citizens. It was very difficult to accept being non-Caucasian at the, at the time.

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EO: So tell me, now, about having to move. How long did you have, and what did you decide to take, and how did you dispose of things?

AH: Oh. I was all of seventeen years old, ready to graduate high school, madly in love with this young *Nisei* man, a young man, who lived on the other side of town, other side of Los Angeles. We were all frantic about where each one of us would be moving to. ...Each family started to roll, to get rid of, to sell or to store their household goods. And then trying to separate out what they thought they would need and what they thought they could either store or sell. It was a hectic, frantic time for all the Japanese families. In our family, my father, as a matter of fact, destroyed all of his Japanese language books because rumors spread that if the FBI came to your home and found Japanese language books, your father or uncle, or mother would be taken away and fear just gripped the community over things like that....

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EO: ...What did you do with your things?

AH: ... Many families owned their homes, so they had a lot more problems in terms of their economic situation and property. We were so poor, we didn't own the home, we were renting, so that, that was not as big a problem for us. Our problem was what to take, what to destroy, what to sell. And the neighbors, the persons, the non-Japanese who were not moving, being asked to move, knew that the shorter time we had to leave, the more willing we would be to lower our prices. So there were

“vultures” all around, hanging around for days, waiting for the day that we would move, and that we would literally have to give things away. ...

EO: And when you got to Manzanar, how did you get there?

AH: We first boarded a train in Los Angeles, went north and we were, we came off the train and buses were there to take us to this desolate, desert area, to this camp called Manzanar ... The day we arrived was hot, dusty. When we got off the bus we were, we lined up and were told which barrack we should go to, to leave our suitcases, then told to go to a certain area where we were issued a sack, long sack which served as the mattress cover, told to fill it with hay, which was, served as our mattress for the period that we were in the camps. It was devastating.

EO: Tell me a little about the landscape and conditions, weather conditions at Manzanar.

AH: Manzanar was, of course, a desert, and all around us was sagebrushes. ... The area was known for... what do they call it? Dust storms where it looked like a tornado, shaped like an upside-down cone. We were besieged by these dust storms day after day after day. The summers were desperately hot and winters were quite cold. The ill, those persons who were ill, the people who were senior citizens, and mothers with little infants, the infants, these persons were the ones who suffered the most because of the unavailability of water in the barracks, the unavailability of food, immediate, which was of such importance.

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EO: Can you recall how you felt when you saw this place?

AH: Yes. As I got off the bus, I could not believe that people were going to live in a place like that. I'd never seen a desert before and there was no civilization. It was just barren, sagebrush-filled area. And it was so depressing. ...

EO: Describe to me your living space.

AH: When we first were assigned to barracks, I was sharing a room, there were seven of us. The room size, I believe, was 16 x 20 feet. ... We separated our living quarters by putting up slats and putting blankets or sheets, I think it was blankets, GI-issued blankets, to give us a little privacy.

That's the second thing, privacy. We just didn't know what it meant anymore. These barracks were built so quickly and with poor quality wood .... If somebody sneezed in apartment 1, you could hear it in apartment 5. If you snored loudly it could be heard. [Laughs] Which now it stands to reason that if something like carried, like that carried... conversations were never private because you could hear everything. The lack of privacy did a lot of damage in the camps, I think. You couldn't, you had to go outside if you wanted to carry on a confidential, private conversation. ...

Source: Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga Interview, March 20, 1994, Courtesy of Emiko and Chizuko Omori, via Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project (<https://densho.org/>). Available via Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project (<http://ddr.densho.org/interviews/ddr-densho-1002-8-1/>). <

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← FDR, Executive Order No. 9066 (1942)

Harry Truman Announcing the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima (1945) →

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