

For Dr. Bob Naka, World War II came to him

The following article comes from “Memories of World War II,” a book written about the residents of the Concord Deaconess community. Naka’s story is submitted with permission by Veterans Agent Dick Krug.

Bob Naka had a unique World War II experience. He did not go to war. Rather, the war came to him. He was imprisoned by the U.S. government as an untrustworthy American for nine months in an internment camp for Japanese Americans.

We were living in Los Angeles, Calif., and my Dad worked in a transpacific passenger and freight steamship company. He was a very learned man in that era, with a MA in economics. When President Roosevelt embargoed steel and oil to the Japanese, my father told me that the Japanese would retaliate. He took me aside and said, “President Roosevelt has declared war on Japan so to speak with these embargos, so we are in for a very rough time.” Then Pearl Harbor came — I was surprised at the audacity of it. As the first generation of Japanese arrivals, my parents had been prevented from applying for citizenship by the “Gentleman’s Agreement” of 1907 and the Alien Exclusion Act of 1924. As children who had been born here, we were citizens, but my parents were not. I graduated from high school at 16 and was a sophomore engineering student at UCLA when the war broke out.

In February 1942, President Roosevelt signed a Presidential Order excluding Japanese Americans from the West Coast of the United States. So 120,000 Japanese Americans were forced out of their homes and relocated to camps in the interior of the country. The evacuations were hasty and harsh, even though 70 percent of those being relocated were citizens. They could only take what they could carry and so forced sales of possessions at prices far below true value were common. Sometimes they only had three days notice before relocation.

Because of my father’s business associations with U.S. Immigration Personnel, he was able to avoid the usual two step process and have us sent directly to Manzanar Relocation camp. The usual first step was to be placed in a race track, to live in a horse stall from which the urine had not been removed — very unhealthy.

The barracks at Manzanar were hastily erected rudimentary wooden structures — they were built of uncured wood, so that as the wood dried, big gaps developed between the boards. Sand would blow right in during the sandstorms and the wind came right through in the winter. About 30 barracks were grouped in one room about 30 feet by 30 feet in area. In my family we only had my parents and me, so we had to share the room with another mother and son. In the middle of the block, there were two latrine and shower buildings, one for men and one for women. For modest Japanese women, this was a source of agony and embarrassment. There was a mess hall in one corner of the block. We lined up for everything.

There was a barbed wire fence around the camp, armed soldiers in watchtowers with search lights at night. The weather where I was in the high desert of California was extreme — very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter.

The labor in the camps was supplied by the inmates. My first job was as a junior cook and my last job was as foreman of the diesel oil distribution crew. All the heat for the mess hall stoves and barracks heaters was supplied by oil.

One day I came home in the Camp and saw a car with U.S. Government plates on it outside our door. I thought — Uh oh, they are going to take my father away. I went in and there was George Latham asking my father to make radio broadcasts to the Japanese saying they were going to lose the war. Like a reverse Tokyo Rose. My father said, “You know I am not a U.S. citizen — I was prevented by the Gentleman’s Agreement laws from becoming one. I am still a citizen of Japan and what you are asking me to do is treason. I will not do it.”

The Quakers formed the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council and persuaded college faculties outside the exclusion areas to take interned college students into their communities and vouch for their safety.

Through the Quaker sponsors, I was supposed to go to Ohio State University in the fall. But there was a student riot there, which was finally quieted when a Japanese American student got up in his saddle shoes and said, "we are just like you." So the Quakers felt it was poor judgment to send me to Ohio. I had to wait four more months to the next February and then they sent me to the University of Missouri.

I finally left the Camp after nine months aided by the Quakers. The night before I left, my parents began arguing. My father said I shouldn't leave because I could be killed, who knows what's out there. My mother became very irritated and said, "If he stays here, he is as good as dead. Let him go out there and take his chances. If he is killed, at least he tried." I left the next day with great trepidation. Perhaps it helped that I was wearing a Navy peacoat that had been distributed to all inmates. When I arrived at the University of Missouri, I was just another student.

How did I feel about all this? It is very depressing to be labeled as a distrusted, unwanted American in the only country I ever knew. I do not have any pictures of this experience as they took our cameras away.

But after that, things worked in my favor. I met my wonderful wife, Pat, at the University of Minnesota when we were both graduate students there; and went on to get a doctorate at Harvard.

It is interesting to note that as my long career progressed, I became one of the "most trusted Americans." At Lincoln Labs, I led the team that developed the first automatic analog radar signal detection equipment to be installed in a radar fence along the polar North American land mass to warn of possible secret bomber attacks. I also developed stealth technology for the famous U-2 spy plane. The most trusted American status came when I ran the super secret spy satellite organization that the U.S. government would not admit existed. Later I served as Chief Scientist of the U.S. Air Force.