Success Story, Japanese-American Style

By WILLIAM PETERSEN

ASKED which of the country's ethnic minorities has been subjected to the most discrimination and the worst injustices, very few persons would even think of answering: "The Japanese Americans." Yet if the question refers to persons alive today, that may well be the correct reply. Like the Negroes, the Japanese have been the object of color prejudice. Like the Jews, they have been feared and hated as hyperefficient competitors. And more than any other group, they have been seen as the agents of an overseas enemy. Conservatives, liberals and radicals, local sheriffs, the Federal Government and the Supreme Court have cooperated in denying them their elementary rights—most notoriously in their World War II evacuation to internment camps.

Generally this kind of treatment, as we all know these days, creates what might be termed "problem mi-

PRESENT—Two decades after the war, Japanese Americans—here, in Los Angeles' "Little Tokyo" and on California farms—lead a generally affluent and, for the most part, highly Americanized life: "Even in a country whose patron saint is the Horatio Alger hero, there is no parallel to their success story."
orities.” Each of a number of interrelated factors—poor health, poor education, low income, high crime rate, unstable family pattern—and so on and on—reinforces all of the others, and together they make up the reality of sham life. And by the “principle of cumulation,” as Gunnar Myrdal termed it in “An American Dilemma,” this social reality reinforces our prejudices and is reinforced by them. When whites defined Negroes as inherently less intelligent, for example, and therefore furnished them with inferior schools, the products of these schools often validated the original stereotype.

Once the cumulative degradation has gone far enough, it is notoriously difficult to reverse the trend. When new opportunities, even equal opportunities, are opened up, the minority’s reaction to them is likely to be negative—either self-defeating stupidity or a hatred so all-consuming as to be self-destructive. For all the well-meaning programs and pointless scholarly studies now focused on the Negro, we barely know how to repair the damage that the slave traders started.

The history of Japanese Americans, however, challenges every such generalization about ethnic minorities, and for this reason alone deserves far more attention than it has been given. Barely more than 50 years after the end of the wartime camps, this is a minority that has risen above even prejudiced criticism. By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort. Every attempt to hamper their progress resulted only in enhancing their determination to succeed. Even in a country whose patron saint is the Horatio Alger hero, there is no parallel to this success story.

From 1880 to almost 142,000 in 1890 the number of Japanese in the United States grew steadily and then remained almost constant for two decades. Then in 1960, with the more than 200,000 Japanese in Hawaii added to the national population, the total reached not quite 475,000. In other words, in prewar years Japanese Americans constituted slightly more than 0.1 per cent of the national population. Even in California, where then as now most of the mainland Japanese lived, they made up only 2.1 per cent of the state’s population in 1920.

Against the perspective of these minuscule percentages, it is difficult to recapture the panasonic flavor of the vast mass of anti-Japanese agitation in the first decades of this century. Prejudice recognized no boundaries of social class; the la bor-dominant Asiatic Exclusion League lived in strange fellowship with the large California businessmen. The rest of the nation gradually adopted what was termed “the California position” in opposing “the Yellow Peril” until finally Asians were totally excluded by the immigration laws of the nineteen-twenties.

Until the exclusion law was enacted, Japanese businesses were picketed. In San Francisco, Japanese were assailed on the streets and, if they tried to protect themselves, were arrested for disturbing the peace. Since marriage across racial lines was prohibited in most Western states, many Japanese lived for years with no normal family life (there were almost 25 males to one female in 1900, still seven to one in 1906, two to one in 1920). Until 1960 no Japanese could be naturalized, and as nondescripts they were denied access to any urban professions than required a license and to the ownership of agricultural land.

But no degradation affected this people as might have been expected. Denied citizenship, the Japanese were exceptionally law-abiding alien residents. Often unable to marry for many years, they developed a family life both strong and flexible enough to help their children cross a wide cultural gap. Denied access to many urban jobs, both white-collar and manual, they undertook menial tasks with such perseverance that they achieved a modest success. Denied ownership of the land, they acquired control through one or another subsurface and... (Continued on Page 53)
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by intensive cultivation of their small plots, helped con- vert this desert into a fabulous agricultural land.

THAT, on Feb. 9, 1942, a bit more than two months after President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8064, giving military commanders authority to exclude any or all persons from designated military areas, the following day, Lieut. Gen. John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, defined the relevant area as major portions of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, California, Nevada, and Utah.

In this vast expanse, all alien Japanese and native-born Americans of Japanese descent — 117,118 persons in all — were subjected to "rapid succession to a curfew, along with the mandatory curfew and evacuation from the same to "relocation centers." Men, women, and children of all ages were uprooted, a total of 24,722 families. Nearly two-thirds were citizens, because they had been born in this country, while one-third were aliens, barred from citizenship.

"Some lost everything they had, many lost most of what they had," said the official report of the War Relocation Authority. The total property left behind by evacuees, according to the report, was worth $230,000,000. After the war, the Government repaid perhaps $200,000 of this money in gold.

The official explanation was that the "evacuation was impelled by military necessity," for fear of a fifth column. As General DeWitt said, "Japs are Japs. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not. They are a danger to the government, whether loyal or not.

The cases of injustice are too numerous to count. One of the more flagrant was that of the case of Issei. After years of harassment, a number of Japanese Americans requested repatriation to Japan, and they were all segregated in the camp at Yule Lake, Calif. On July 1, 1944, Congress passed a special law by which Japanese Americans might renounce their American citizenship and the camps authorities permitted tough Japanese nationalism seeking converts to capitalize on the fear of a "takeover" of the other inmates. Partly as a consequence, 5,371 American-born citizens signed a petition apologizing for their citizenship. Many of them were minority groups who were pressured by their distrustful and disillusioned parents; their applications were illegally accepted by the Attorney General. A small number of the renunciations were removed to Japan and chosen to acquire Japanese citizenship. A few cases are still pending, more than 30 years after the event.

For the length of the evacuation, the internment was voiced by the U.S. District Court in San Francisco after five years of litigation.

WHO are the Japanese Americans; what manner of people were subjected to these processes? Seen from the outside, they strike the white observer as a solid unitary group, but even a casual ac-

The kibei, American-born Japanese who had spent some time in Japan being educated, lived in Japanese, were in the United States, often published in Japanese newspapers or journals. It is true, the sojourn in Japan, with its free use of the language and its affectations, fostered the parents' sentimentalism into committed nationalism. In many instances, however, the effect of sending a provincial boy alone into the Tokyo's tumultuous life was the contrary. Many of them, in the United States, were not kibei taught in the Army language schools or worked for the O.S.S. and other intelligence agencies.

Camp life was given a special poignancy by the Defense Department's changing policy concerning interracial relationships. Until June, 1943, all kibei were eligible for military service on the same basis as other young men. Then, with the evacuation completed and the label of disloyalty thus given official sanction, all kibei were put in class IV-C, "enemy aliens." The Japanese American Citizens League (J.A.C.L.), the group's main political voice, fought for the right of the American citizens to raise their children on their own, and by the end of the year won its point.

Most of the volunteers went into the 442nd Regiment, the unit known as the "Jap" unit. This was the most highly decorated unit, it contained more than 1,000 Purple Hearts, 11 Distinguished Service Crosses, 32 Silver Stars, 3 Distinguished Service Crosses, and 3 Legion of Merit ribbons. It was one of the finest units in the United States Army.
UPROOTED. A family eats dinner at one of the internment camps in which Japanese Americans were confined during World War II. Right, a poster in San Francisco announcing the program. The evacuees left behind property worth $200 million; despite the promise of "services with respect to the management" of such property, many lost everything they had.

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the most decorated units in all three services.

With this extraordinary record built up, the Secretary of War announced another change of policy: the nisei in camps became subject to the draft. As District Judge Louis Goodman declared it was "shocking to the conscience that an American citizen be confined on the ground of disloyalty," and hence under duress and restraint, be compelled to serve in the armed forces, or be prosecuted for not yielding to such compulsion." He released 26 nisei from his court for refusing to report for induction.

The Government's varying policies posed dilemmas for every young man it affected. Faced with unreasonable prejudice and gross discrimination, some nisei refused as one would expect. Thus, several hundred young men who had served in the armed forces from 1940 to 1942 and then had been discharged because of their race were among the renounced at Pulelake. But most accepted as their lot the overwhelming odds against them and bet after lives, determined to win even in a crooked game.

In John Okada's novel "No-No Boy," written by a veteran of the Pacific war about a nisei who refused to accept the draft, the tale is sharply drawn. The hero's mother, who had raised him to be a Japanese nationalist, turns out to be paranoid. Back in Seattle from the prison where he served his time (he was not tried in Judge Goodman's court), the hero struggles to find his way to the America that rejected him and that he had rejected. A nisei friend who has returned from the war with a wound that eventually kills him is pictured as relatively well-off. In short, in contrast to the works of James Baldwin, this is a novel of revolt against revolt.

T HE key to success in the United States, for Japanese or anyone else, is education. Among persons aged 14 years (Continued on Page 38)
or over in 1950, the median years of schooling completed by the Japanese were 12.2, compared with 11.1 years by Chinese, 11.0 by whites, 9.2 by Filipinos, 8.8 by Negroes and 8.4 by Indians. In the nineteen-thirties, when even members of favored ethnic groups often could find no jobs, the nisei went to school and avidly prepared for that one chance in a thousand. One high school boy used to read, underline again, then read and underline a third time. "I'm not smart," he would explain, "so if I am to go to college, I have to work three times as hard."

From their files, one can derive a composite picture of the nisei who have gone through the Berkeley placement center of the University of California over the past 10 years or so. Their marks were good to excellent but, apart from outstanding individuals, this was not a group that would succeed solely because of extraordinary academic worth. The extracurricular activities they listed were prosaic - the Nisei Student Club, various fraternities, field sports, only occasionally anything even as slightly off the beaten track as jazz music.

Their dependence on the broader Japanese community was suggested in a number of ways. Students had personal references from nisei professors in totally unrelated fields, and the part-time jobs they held (almost all had to work)

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"causes" of crime. In such a slum environment, even though surrounded by ethnic groups, they have been exceptionally law-abiding."

Pro. Harry Kitano of U.C. L.A., has collated the probation records of the Japanese in Los Angeles County. Adult offenses fell from 1920 to a peak in 1940 and then declined sharply to 1960; but throughout the 40-year period the rate was consistently under that for non-Japanese. In Los Angeles today, while the rate for Japanese is 24 per 1,000 for Japanese adults it is continuing to fall.

According to California life tables for 1950-51, Japanese Americans in the state had a life expectation of 74.5 years for men and 81.5 years for women. This is six to seven years longer than that of California females. This is the first time that any population anywhere has attained an average longevity of more than 80 years.

For the sampler—the "third generation," the children of parents—this is their experience is still a half-forgettable childhood for many children of Japanese ancestry who have not been assimilated into American society. The parents, however, are not as pessimistic about the future of the younger generation. They believe that the younger generation will be more Americanized in the future and that they will have a better chance of attaining success in American society.

Frank Chuman, a Los Angeles lawyer, has had experience in organizing and training a number of Japanese youth organizations. He believes that the younger generation will be more Americanized in the future and that they will have a better chance of attaining success in American society. He also believes that the younger generation will be more Americanized in the future and that they will have a better chance of attaining success in American society.

The history of the United States is long and eventful, and it has been marked by many great changes. The United States has been a land of opportunity for many people who have come from many different parts of the world. The United States has been a land of opportunity for many people who have come from many different parts of the world. The United States has been a land of opportunity for many people who have come from many different parts of the world.
That a person who carries this visible stigma has little or no possibility of rising. There is obviously a good deal of truth in the theory, and the Japanese case is of general interest precisely because it constitutes the outstanding exception.

What made the Japanese Americans different? What gave them the strength to thrive on adversity? To say that it was their "national character" or "De Nisee subculture" or some paraphrase of these terms is merely to give a label to our ignorance. But it is true that we must look for the persistent pattern these terms imply, rather than for isolated factors.

The Issei who came to America were uprooted, dislocated, dispossessed, and thrown out of Japan. The emphasis was heavily on the nationalistic aspect, and the Issei tended to think in terms of family rather than personal advantage. This is the main reason they were so successful, and the main reason that the Nisei were so successful.

The two vehicles that transmitted such values from one generation to the next, the family and religion, have been so intimately linked as to reinforce each other. By Japanese tradition, the wish of the individual counts for far less than the good reputation of his family name, which was enhanced through his ancestors. Most Nisei attended Japanese-language schools either one hour each weekday or all Saturday morning, and of all the shukusai, or maxima, that they memorized these none was more important than: "Honor your obligations to parents and avoid bringing them shame." Some rural parents enforced such commands by what was called the moza treatment—a bit of intense burns on the child's skin. Later, group ridicule and ostracism, in which the peers of a naughty child or a rebellious teen-ager joined, became the usual, very effective control.

This respect for authority is strongly reinforced in the Japanese-American, churches, whether Buddhist or Christian. The underlying similarity among the various denominations is suggested by the fact that parents who object strongly to the marriage of their offspring to persons of other races (including, and sometimes, even especially, to Chinese) are more or less indifferent to interreligious marriages within the Japanese groups. Buddhist churches have adapted to the American scene by introducing Sunday schools, Boy Scouts, a promotional effort around the theme "Our Family, Far East, Churches Reguarly," and similar practices quite alien to the old-country tradition.

On the other hand, as I was told not only by Buddhist but also by nisei (Christian minis- ters, Japanese-American school-teacher, whatever faith are distinguished by their at- tention to and their greater respect for parental and other authority. Underly- ing this dualistic life is the os, that is to say, there seems to be an adaptation to American institutional forms with a consider- able persistence of Buddhist moral values.

It is too easy however, to misconceive, as has happened to Japanese American. After all the subordinate- ties and subordination to the group and the dominance of the husband-father typified the family life of most immi- grants from the Southern or Eastern Europe.

Indeed, sociologists have fashioned a plausible theory to explain why the rate of delinquency was usually high, among these nationalities. It was the counterpart of the nisei. The American-born child speaks English without impediment, the thesis goes, and is probably preparing for a better job and thus a higher status than his father's. In other words, there is a larger pool to draw from, and thus it is more difficult to retain his authority, and as the young man comes to view him with contempt or shame, he generalizes this perception into a rejection of all authority.

Not that the theory seems, to hold for Japanese Americans but, in some re- spect, the life's circumstances aggravate the typical tensions. The extreme isolation between American and Japanese adding to the fact that even if the Americans were native-born, this generation has not encountered the same degree of intermarriage, and the Nisei have grown up in a cultural environment that is not American, that is, the Japanese culture, reinforced by the American culture that they have been exposed to.

Each artificial restriction on the American-born Nisei, they could not become citizens, they did not have to conform to the American way of life, their identity was as important to them as their American identity. And, in some cases, this identity was reinforced by their social status, by their superior status, by their higher education, by their higher occupation, by their higher income, by their higher status in the community.

This is not to suggest that there has been no conflict or tension. It is simply to point out that the Nisei have been more fortunate in their situation than the Issei.

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Nine Tailors, Etc.

In 1942, the U.S. State Department arranged for the deportation from Peru to the United States of nine Japanese tailors, to be followed by more than 2,100 other Japanese residents of Peru and other South American nations. Many were native-born Peruvian citizens, and all had been declared politically innocuous after a full investigation by the Department of Justice.

The United States wanted them in order to exchange them for American citizens interned in countries occupied by Japan. Actually, none was ever used.

They were shifted from one camp to another. Then, after the war, the Federal Government began proceedings to deport them to Japan for having entered the country without proper papers (although under escort of U.S. military police). Their plight came to the attention of Wayne Collins, the San Francisco lawyer of the American Civil Liberties Union and, for years, a defender of the rights of Japanese Americans. Collins telephoned a lawyer in the Justice Department in Washington. When he heard who was calling, this Government attorney audibly exclaimed to a colleague: "Oh, oh, Collins has found them!"

In a seemingly endless series of legal moves, for which there were no precedents, Collins won their right not to go to Japan but back to Peru—and then not to go to Peru (which for years refused to permit their re-entry) but to stay in the United States. In 1954, after 12 years in and out of camps, in constant litigation, the South American Japanese were permitted to apply for permanent residence in the United States, and many became citizens.

—W.P.

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Theories, in other words, do not apply.

One difficulty, I believe, is that we have accepted too readily the common notion that the minority whose subculture most closely approximates to American can is the most likely to adjust successfully. Acculturation is a bridge, and by this view the shorter the span the easier it is to cross it. But like most metaphors drawn from the physical world, this one affords only a partial truth about social reality.

The minority most thoroughly imbedded in American culture, with the least meaningful ties to an overseas fatherland, is the American Negro. As those Negro intellectuals who have visited Africa have discovered, their links to "negritude" are usually too artificial to survive a close association with the Negro. As to other Americans—strange and fascinating continent. But a Negro who knows no other heritage, who is as thoroughly American as any Daughter of the American Revolution, has no place when the United States rejects him. Placed at the bottom of this country's scale, he finds it difficult to salvage his ego by measuring his worth in another currency.

The Japanese, on the contrary, still cling over the highest barriers: our racism, our racial snobbery, our loyalty to such alien culture. Pride in their heritage and shame for any reduction in its only partly legendary glory—these were sufficient to carry the group through its travail. And I do not believe that their effectiveness will lessen during our lifetime, in spite of the nation's exploratory ventures into new corners of the wider American world. The group's cohesion is maintained by its well-grounded distrust of any but that small group of whites—a few church organizations, some professionals, and particularly the A.C.L.U. in California—that dared go beyond the conservative liberal-radical coalition that built, or defended, America's concentration camps.

The Chinese in California, I am told, read the newspapers these days with a particular zest. They wonder whether it could happen here again.