

Pages for All Ages

Cruelty and Kindness in Wartime

Josephine Duveneck loved adventure. She loved justice, too. In 1936, just a few years before the start of World War Two, Josephine took a trip to Germany with her family. They rented bikes and rode through the German countryside. The travelers were Josephine, her husband Frank, and three of their four children.

In every German village they visited, the family saw a paper sign that shocked and saddened them. The sign read, "*Hier sind juden nicht Gewünscht.*" The words mean, "Here Jews are not wanted." Josephine wanted to tear the signs down. Frank stopped her because he didn't want any trouble with the Nazis. In those days, Hitler ruled Germany. Hitler and the Nazis were trying to kill everybody who was different from them. Riding her bike through the beautiful German countryside, Josephine felt sick. Germany looked like a paradise, but she knew that the country was full of cruelty.

A few years later, Josephine saw another paper sign that made her feel sick. By that time, Germany was at war with many other countries in Europe. Japan was at war with other countries in Asia. Then, near

the end of 1941, Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. This led the United States to go to war with Japan.

Josephine lived in Northern California in those days. Many Japanese-Americans also lived there. After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Government made all Japanese-Americans promise that they would never support Japan. This upset the Japanese-Americans, but they were loyal Americans, and so they promised to do what the Government said.

Josephine was working with the American Friends Service Committee then. She went to their office in San Francisco on March 30, 1942. As she walked through the streets there, Josephine saw something else that shocked and saddened her. She saw the same paper sign on every telephone pole she passed. The signs said that every person with Japanese ancestors must leave the area in a month. It was as if the signs said, "Here Japanese are not wanted."

The U.S. government was getting ready to take 122,000 Japanese-American people away from their homes. The government was preparing "camps" in lonely places to hold these Japanese-Americans. The camps were inside barbed wire fences. Soldiers with guns guarded the gates. The project was too big to stop, but Josephine felt like she had to do something.

For the rest of World War Two, Josephine worked with other Quakers to show some kindness to Japanese-Americans, while the U.S. government showed them cruelty. Many other people tried to show kindness too.

The Japanese-Americans only had a few weeks to leave their homes and move into the camps. They didn't know if they were leaving their homes forever. The government said they could take almost nothing with them. They could only take what they could carry. It was a mad scramble for them to sell their houses and furniture and cars and businesses. Many



Hikaru Inasaki, 1945 (National Archives)



of them got cheated. Josephine and her husband Frank tried to help some of them find fair deals.

All the rest of her life, Josephine remembered the morning when Japanese-Americans came to the place in San Francisco where they would start their journey to the camps. On all the streets and the hills around her, Josephine saw little groups of people hurrying with suitcases, bags, boxes, and all kinds of objects. One carried a birdcage. Another had a hundred-year-old dwarf tree in a pot. People carried blanket rolls, baby baskets, toy animals, dolls, boxes of books, heavy coats, and umbrellas.

The gathering place was guarded inside and out by soldiers with bayonets. Josephine and other Friends brought coffee, tea, hot chocolate, doughnuts, and sandwiches for the Japanese-Americans. They brought extra string to tie up sagging bundles. They brought envelopes, paper, and stamps. They brought a little stove to heat baby bottles. They brought Kleenex to wipe the tears off the faces of frightened little children. They helped pin labels on every Japanese-American, and doing that made them feel terrible. Each person, even the babies, had to have a number.

When the buses arrived, the Japanese-Americans gathered themselves and their things together. They got ready to climb onto the buses. The soldiers watched everything. Josephine and her friends helped get the luggage in. They helped lift children onto the steps of the bus. They watched while the Japanese-Americans found their seats inside. When each bus was full, they waved goodbye. Tears streamed down their cheeks when the bus moved away. "Wipe them away quickly, girls," they told each other. "We have to go cheer up the next group."

For the next four years, Josephine and many other people argued with the U.S. government. They said that the camps should be closed. The Japanese-Americans inside the camps were loyal Americans. Some of them had served as U.S. soldiers in World War One. Some of them had sons fighting as U.S. soldiers at that very moment.

But the camps didn't close completely until the war was over. When the Japanese-Americans were set free, they had to start their lives over. Many of them returned to nothing. They had lost their homes, their businesses, and their savings.

Josephine always remembered that time in history with shame. But that time taught her some



important lessons, too. She said it showed her how fragile our democracy is when our country feels threatened. It also showed her the way that hard times can make strong friendships. Some of the people that Josephine and Frank helped in those days became their life-long friends. Every Christmas, they received packages of fortune cookies, dried fruit, children's photographs, and countless notes remembering rare moments of precious closeness. They accepted those gifts of love with gratitude, and they gave their love in return. ❖

- If you had to leave your home suddenly, maybe forever, what would you carry with you?
- Have you ever been cheated or betrayed? What could anyone do to help you when that happens?
- Who is being cheated in the world today? How could we help them?

This story was adapted from pages 39-44 of A Western Quaker Reader, published by Western Friend (2000). Some details were drawn from the Japanese American Relocation Digital Archives of the University of California: <http://www.calisphere.universityofcalifornia.edu/jarda/historical-context.html>.

