

Grave Injustice Done Japanese On West Coast

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, June 1942, 1, 3.

Summary: Decries the resettlement of Japanese Americans during World War II into concentration camps and describes their living conditions. (DDLW #218).

I saw a bit of Germany on the west coast. I saw some of the concentration camps where the Japanese, men, women and children are being held before they are resettled in the Owens Valley or some other place barren, windswept, inaccessible.

The strange part of this wholesale imprisonment of an innocent people is that many of them are native born citizens of this country. But that means nothing in wartime.

Wholesale evacuation of areas in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and Seattle have already been carried out and as I stopped in each city, there were still groups being moved. Whole areas had been vacated, houses empty. According to friends in Portland, business and property had to be sold at a loss and there were those who took advantage of this misfortune of the evacuees.

Saving Them from Others

Various attitudes are taken. Some say the move was for the safety of the Japanese. "If there were any great defeats, if lists of dead and wounded were printed, there would be wholesale slaughter." This is the opinion of one acquaintance in Los Angeles, which I heard voiced quite often since. Such a sentiment does not speak well for America. Have we then as a nation so little confidence in our police, in lawfully constituted authority or do we so lightly expect mob violence?

Some bitterness is expressed at the pampering of the Japanese. "They are living the life of Riley," an acquaintance in Portland said. As if to live without work and in imprisonment is something pleasurable to look forward. All who have ever been prisoners know that to live behind bars without occupation is torture.

"It is because it is impossible to tell the Chinese and Japanese apart that this move is taken," others say. And there are lurid tales of respected Japanese citizens who have been discovered to be spies.

Misery and Bewilderment

I have read a number of letters from Japanese girls to school mates, from mothers of families to friends of ours. All speak of bitter misery and bewilderment.

“There are flood lights turned on us at night,” one letter said. (A friend of ours in New York, a woman doctor who had been put in a German concentration camp for a year, had complained of just such a light which kept anyone in the prison camp from sleeping.)

“There is no privacy,” another letter read. “There are long rows of toilets, all facing each other, with no partitions in between, and rows of showers. It is very cold out here, because the building is full of knot-holes. There is no place for the children, we hear their crying all night and all day.”

Degradation of Human Being

We drove around the detention camp for the Japanese at Portland, and it is a stockyard where cattle shows have been held which is being used to hold some thousands, until they are moved to a more permanent place. We could wave to some friends and neighbors of the people we were staying with but there was no chance to stop to talk. We drove past the race track outside of San Francisco also where we saw lines of people waiting for their meal, others looking through the high wire fences which are topped with barbed wire.

Sentries parole these stockyards and race tracks and on some sides there are towers like those around prison walls where soldiers keep watch night and day.

Whole families are in little rooms which are built like cells and the partitions of which do not reach the ceiling in the camp outside Seattle. I read letters from this encampment as well as from the one outside Portland and the stories were substantially the same. The enforced idleness, the imprisonment, the lack of privacy, the enforced association with criminal types, in two letters insufficient food was commented on.

Some Alleviation

Maryknoll priests are permitted to go within the enclosure on Sundays to offer up Mass, and a few nuns have gained entrance with them to teach catechism. But the time they are allowed on Sunday morning is all too short.

There was some attempt to transfer students from coast colleges to other states, but in one case at least there were bad results. The students, some girls, were transferred to Moscow, Idaho, there was a threat from a few men of mob violence, the girls were taken to jail for a few nights, and then through the influence of friends transferred to another college, at Pullman, Washington, where a town meeting of citizens clarified public opinion and insured proper treatment of the young students.

Most of the prisoners are hoping to be released to go inland, to other cities and start life anew, away from the pacific coast area. They are urging their friends to try to affect this release. But in general the spirit of the Japanese, though they have submitted in dignified silence, is one of hopeless misery. They are the first victims of war in this country, and if we did not cry out against this injustice done them, if we did not try to protest it, we would be failing in two of the works of mercy, which are to visit the prisoner, and to ransom the captive.

We beg the prayers of our readers, for these potential members of the Mystical Body of Christ.