

TEACHER'S GUIDE
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MISSION US: "Prisoner in My Homeland"

Poem: "Saga of a People" by Ruth Tanaka

Ruth Tanaka was a high school junior at Poston Incarceration Camp in Arizona and won fourth prize for a national contest sponsored by Scholastic Magazine in 1945. This poem was printed in the Poston Chronicle, the prison camp newspaper.

*They have sprung from a race as old as Time,
Their backs are bent, their hands are wrinkled and brown,
For they have toiled long years under a harsh master — Life;
Each passing year has left its mark
Upon their seamed and weathered faces
That show as other faces do,
A heart-deep yearning for a far-off land;
A land of frail houses, stunted trees, a sacred volcano
Sleeping under a blanket of snow.
Traces of half-forgotten customs
A love for the life-giving sun, the freshening rain, the deep brown soil,
Still lingers in their hearts.
Deep scars of pain and grief are etched on their worn faces
And yet their wise twinkling eyes
Have looked on life and found it good.*

*They have come to a fabulous land,
While still dreaming the long thoughts of youth;
They have sowed their seeds, weeded furrows,
Hoed a sun-parched land, watered it and nursed it,
Harvested their plentiful crops, built a home
And borne their children.
Lest they forget the islands of their fathers,
They have brought their little treasures with them -
A miniature chest of drawers, lacquered dragon-red;
Two dainty fans gay with dancing girls;
A bamboo screen with a tiny arched bridge
A fragile lilies reflected in still water;
Little dolls in bright kimonos of hand-painted silk;
Delicate tea cups get on a polished tray.*

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*The seeds they sowed took root and sprouted;
Grew tall and straight with bursting pods;
Giving rich promise of fulfillment.
So grew their black-haired children
Straight and tall, drawing nourishment from the free soil
Of this, their native land.
Their lives were like a deep, peaceful river
The old familiar customs of their ancestors
Mixing with the new bewildering ones of their foster country
And slowly giving way before them
Eating a breakfast of crisp bacon and scrambled eggs
Instead of the hot soup and rice they had eaten
In the home of their fathers;
Raising a huge paper carp on Boys' Day;
Awkwardly tying a silver star to the tip of the family Christmas tree;
Reluctantly going to a movie with the children,
Leaving behind a friendly game of Go
And a cup of steaming, green tea;
Driving to the beach and learning to roast hot dogs
Over a driftwood fire,
And eating them with seed-covered rice cakes;
Passing on to their children the ceremonious courtesies
That they had learned so long ago.
And so they lived out their lives
Guided by their sons and daughters
Through this strange new world,
Slowly changing their deep-rooted ways.*

*They have come to a new home
Living in a single room
Behind barbed wire -
They know that peace has been shattered throughout the world
By heavily laden bombs of terror and destruction;
But they who love the deeply tranquil soil
Are stunned, bewildered by it all,
By the cold wall which their American friends
Have built about them.*

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*Now they are standing on the beloved soil of their Western mother,
Their wizened bodies huddled together
Against the bitter cold.
Rising they look toward the sea
Vainly striving through the mists of the past
To live again the dreams of their youth,
Thinking of a pleasant land where cherry blossoms
Warmed their hearts in spring,
Where placid goldfish lazily swam in sunny ponds,
Where all the contented and peaceful;
They turn towards the red glow of a sinking sun
Seeing through the distant hills, seeing over all the land
The rolling hills and valleys of their western mother.
Then they turn towards each other with eyes full,
Unshamedly,
Understandingly;
For deep in their almond, brown eyes,
Deep in the innermost depths of their souls (?)
There shall always glow a hope,
A hope that peace shall come one day
A peace forging with understanding and friendship,
The islands of their long-lost youth
And the far stretching land of their children's birth.*