

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION US: "Prisoner in My Homeland"

"The Years Between" by Kaizo Kubo

Kaizo was a high school junior at Poston Incarceration Camp in Arizona and won honorable mention for this essay in a national contest sponsored by Scholastic Magazine in 1945. This essay was printed in the Poston Chronicle, prison camp newspaper.

My name is Kaizo Kubo. I have a story to tell. It concerns three years of my past, years which will no doubt leave their marks on me to the end of my days. My name probably sounds strange, foreign; so will my story.

I am American, although for the last three long years I have been so in name only. I am writing these very words behind the shadows of barbed wire. I've done no wrong. My only crime is that my hair is black, my skin yellow, my eyes slant; because I am of Japanese ancestry. This is my personal account of prejudice and of human blindness. This is a plan for future justice and tolerance.

I was born in a small town in California not far from the Pacific Ocean. If not for an unfortunate quirk of fate, I would in all probability have never stirred from the scene of so many happy memories. That black day I read the news in the daily papers left me momentarily paralyzed. I stared in mute incredulity at the words emblazoned in bold print: GOVERNMENT ORDERS MASS REMOVAL OF ALL JAPANESE FROM COAST HOMES TO INLAND WAR CENTERS.

I took it hard. It meant leaving the only life I knew, parting with my boyhood friends. It spelled goodbye to life. Was this what I had believed in? Was this democracy?

In the ensuing weeks I was spared little time to brood or to think. In the upheaval that followed, we lost our home. Our belongings were either discarded or at best sold at pitiful losses. Before my very eyes my world crumbled.

From the instant I stepped into the barbed wire enclosures of our destination, I felt that queer alienable presence within me. All the rash bravado I had saved for this precise moment vanished like a disembodied soul. I suddenly felt incredibly small and alone. So this was imprisonment.

The oppressive silhouette of the guard towers looming cold and dark in the distance affected me in only one way. They seemed to threaten, to challenge me. I hated their ugly hugeness, the power they symbolized. I hold only contempt for that for which they stand. They kept poignantly clear in my mind the unescapable truth that I was a prisoner.

Then my life as an evacuee began, with a government granted broom, a bucket, and a twelve by twenty foot room. We were quartered in converted horse stables which fairly reeked with evidence of recent occupation. Men, women, and children shared these discomforts alike. I

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learned to eat with strangers, to wash and bathe side by side with unfamiliar faces, and I learned that to hear and not be heard was the best or at least the most healthful policy to follow.

At first I was inclined to think my imagination was provoking the well of silence that seemed to shroud my being, but it was real, as real as evacuation itself. An incomprehensible air of tension hung over the confines of the entire center. Twenty thousand souls brooding. It was not pleasant. The next abruptly discernable phase was a lifting of the silence and in a surprisingly short time, the atmosphere had changed to a noisy, equally unpredictable show of human emotions. Camp life is like that - uncertain.

Three years of a hard existence behind steel and armed guards, no matter what the conditions, cannot go without its ill effects. Our family, like most Japanese families prior to evacuation, was very alone. Today, after three years of communal living, I find myself stumbling over words as I make vain attempts to talk to my father. I don't understand him; he doesn't understand me. It is a strange feeling to find such a barrier between my father and myself.

The fixed routine existence offers little incentive for progress; homes, a gradual loss of individual enterprise and initiative is in evidence. I have undergone a similar period of lethargy myself. It is like living in a realm of forgotten people. It was a strange and disturbing malady developed under unusual circumstances, but I overcame it, and with the restoration I won back my faculty of logical and clear thinking.

Here is what I say: there is no need to be bitter. We are situated thus through no fault of our own, but there is nothing to gain by eternally brooding for things that might have been. I have exacted lessons from my past which I hope to put to advantage in my future.

I shall be on my own. It will be no new experience for me. Evacuation was a pioneering project; re-establishing myself into the American stream of life can be looked upon as another such enterprise. Now I stand on the threshold of freedom. I face the future unafraid, proud of my ancestry, but even prouder of my heritage as an American.

--Kaizo Kubo
Honorable Mention
Scholastic Literary Contest