

Michi Nishiura

Harriet Shapiro

MICHI

When the United States entered World War II in December 1941, fifteen-year-old Michi Nishiura was one of 93,000 Japanese Americans living in California. Her father, Tomojiro Nishiura, an immigrant from Japan, grew cantaloupes, tomatoes, cucumbers, and apricots for the owner of a 500-acre farm in a small town in the San Joaquin Valley, some fifty miles east of San Francisco. Twenty-four hundred miles to the west, on December 7, 1941, the United States fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii was attacked. The following morning the United States declared war on Japan.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which would in time consign the Nishiuras and 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry living along the Pacific Coast to relocation centers. Along with 14,000 other Japanese Americans, Michi, her sister, Tomi, and her parents were to spend several years in the Gila (heel-a) Relocation Center in Arizona. There were nine other camps like Gila in the United States.

"Many Japanese Americans have been quiet about the internment for all these years because it's still painful to talk about what happened to us," Michi explained recently in New York City where she now lives. She was for many years a successful costume designer, and her husband is a perfume chemist. She is the author of *Years of Infamy*, a well-researched and documented history of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. But in her book she did not describe her own experiences at Gila. Why? Michi explains that she still feels ill at ease talking about the two years that she spent in the Arizona camp.

"Because I haven't wanted to harbor any ill feelings, I have tried to erase unpleasant memories from my mind," she says. "It becomes very difficult to reconstruct what you have tried to wipe out." It was much easier for her to talk first about growing up on a farm before the war. She lived with her family in a large, rundown house where the croquet field near the fig and olive trees was one of the few traces of elegance left over from the days when the farm was an estate.

Michi's family lived on the ground floor, and the migrant laborers whom Tomojiro Nishiura supervised lived on the floor above them. The farm's population swelled at harvest time, and its barns and toolsheds became hastily converted sleeping quarters. Some workers who had driven into the farmlands to pick crops pitched their tents in the large front yard. All the Nishiuras were out in the fields, too. There were many nights they worked straight through until dawn irrigating the vegetables. With a kerosene lantern, Michi, who looked like a skinny little boy, waited across the field in the dark at the dry end of the irrigation ditch. There she would wave the lantern as a signal to her father just before the water reached her feet. She fed the chickens and horses. Many mornings she would work a few hours before she went to school, all the time trying to prove to her father that she was as valuable as the son he had wanted when she was born. "In Japanese culture," Michi explains, "it's disastrous if a family doesn't have an heir, a male offspring to carry on the family name and help in the fields."

During summer months her morning chores involved driving the

workers in the back of a Ford truck to the crops. Then she would return to look after the farm's noisy gang of cats and dogs. Whenever they could, Michi and her sister rescued kittens their neighbors had bundled into gunnysacks and abandoned on the Nishiura's road.

"They knew my sister and I had a soft heart for animals. But Mom, if she saw these castaways first, got rid of as many as she could, because we couldn't afford to feed them. I feel so guilty now that we didn't take better care of them. But we couldn't afford doctors for ourselves, much less veterinarians for the animals. When Pop fell off a ladder once and stuck a pruning shear in his thigh, instead of seeing a doctor, he got a bottle of iodine and poured it into the wound." Besides her cats and dogs, there were the family chickens, a flawed strain producing some strange-looking specimens without feathers. Michi fitted these chickens with clothes she had made, her first costume designs.

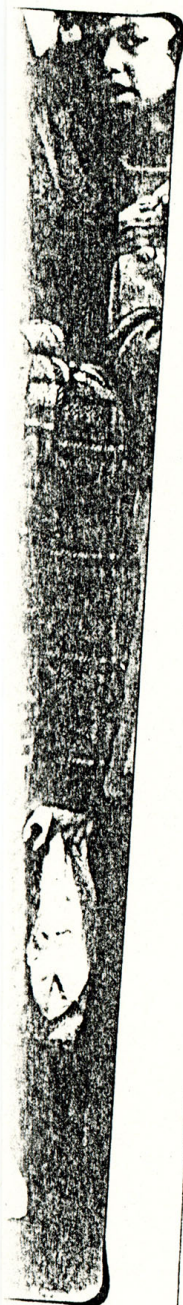
Another less peaceful world hovered outside the farm. Between 1890 and 1924 some 300,000 Asians had come to this country. Like the 1882 laws that had restricted Chinese immigration, the 1924 Immigration Act prevented any more Japanese immigrants from entering the country. Those Japanese who had come to the United States before 1924, as Michi's parents had, were called *Issei*, which means "first generation" in Japanese. Like other Asian immigrants, the *Issei* were not allowed to become U.S. citizens, which meant that they could not own land in many states or vote in the United States. But their children, called *Nisei* ("second generation"), were U.S. citizens because they were born here.

Eventually, the *Issei* and *Nisei* family unit made up a significant segment of the California farm-labor force. They turned swamps, deserts, and narrow strips along railroad tracks into fertile farms. By the beginning of World War II, the tiny (1%) Japanese-American minority in California was operating close to one-half of the truck farming in the state. The Japanese Americans were also small-shop owners and professionals.

At grade school Michi chose Mexican Americans and Filipinos as her friends. She explains: "Even when I was a little child my parents instilled in me *enryo*, a backing away, a shyness, especially with



Elementary school children—April 20, 1942



white people. I knew my place. Later, in high school, I was very self-conscious and terribly concerned about what people would think of me. My parents had taught me that I must not offend. They used to talk often about *haiseki*, or discrimination."

And *haiseki* did flare up around her after the war began. On December 7, 1941, the Nishiuras were sitting around the kitchen table listening to the radio when they heard that Japanese bombers had attacked Pearl Harbor. Michi found it very hard to go to school the next day because she felt she looked like the enemy. When she got there she heard the teacher tell the other students, "It's not the fault of the Japanese Americans. You are not to mistreat them."

The days and months that followed Pearl Harbor were frightening for her. "We lived in terrible dread. Japanese-American community leaders and dozens of friends and neighbors were arrested. Saying something favorable about Japan could put you on a suspect list. These raids seemed to be made to reassure the public. One family wondered if owning their grandfather's sword, a relic of the Russo-Japanese War, might make them suspect. I recall my parents going out in the middle of the night and burning books and burying things—anything that might show their attachment to Japan, such as photographs of relatives, letters, even some of their beloved art treasures. Every time Japan won a battle in the Pacific, people hated us more."

Those Japanese military successes were partially responsible for wartime legislation that affected all persons of Japanese descent, two-thirds of them American citizens. On March 2, 1942, the western halves of the Pacific Coast states and the southern third of Arizona were designated as military areas. On telephone poles signs appeared that read: "All Japanese persons, both alien and nonalien, will be evacuated from this designated area. . . ."

Michi's family and all the other Japanese Americans on the Pacific Coast soon learned what those signs meant. They were allowed six to ten days to dispose of their property and businesses. "My father had to go to a makeshift government office," says Michi, "where he was assigned a family number and told when we would be taken away. The Japanese Americans very obediently turned themselves in.

Although they thought it dreadfully unfair to have to leave their homes, they felt powerless. The Issei, as enemy aliens, had no political voice, and neither did the Nisei since most were not yet of voting age."

Packing up was an ordeal. The Nishiuras found strangers turning up at their door. "People wanted to buy our bicycles and automobiles for next to nothing, and the chickens for a quarter apiece. At that price Mom decided it would be better to eat as many chickens as we could before we left. To this day, when my sister and I talk about that period, the hurried killing and eating of our pet chickens was one of the most traumatic aspects of the evacuation. Our father and mother were losing everything they had worked for, but my sister and I had little realization of that. For us it was parting with our animals: our cats, dogs, chickens, our possum, and our parrot. Most were left abandoned. I guess that's what war is like. But these are the things that are not written up in history books."

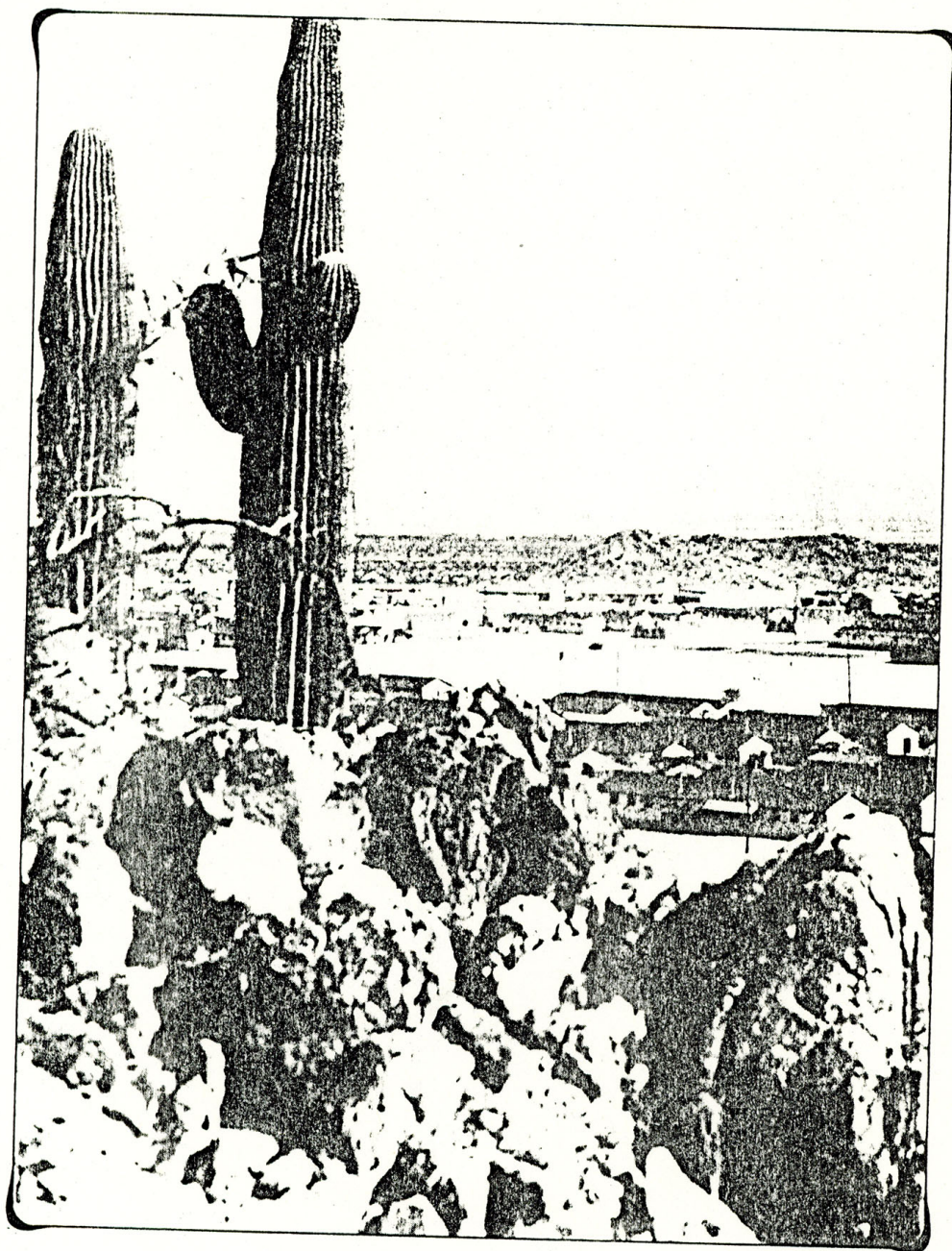
What belongings they could not sell in time the Nishiuras stored in a neighbor's shed, hoping to retrieve them at the end of the war. Then early in the morning of May 12, 1942, a neighbor drove the Nishiuras to a nearby town where, with other evacuees, they were loaded on buses that carried them to the site of their first detention camp, the "Turlock Assembly Center." There the evacuees found guard towers, guns, and barbed wire awaiting them.

The U.S. army, which had built these camps, said that the Japanese Americans had to be protected from outraged citizens. Rules were very strict. Michi's new life was regulated with a camp head count every night at nine P.M. and lights out by ten. "In the beginning, when we had visitors, we were not allowed to touch them, and all incoming parcels were inspected. When friends brought food, the guards checked even that to be sure no guns were being smuggled in. Sometimes even the mail was checked."

After several months, Michi, her sister, Tomi, her parents, and hundreds of others were put on a train that took them to the relocation camp in Gila. They traveled two days and nights over mountains and through vast desert areas to reach their isolated new camp. Because war cargo had priority on the tracks, the trainload of



Evacuees—May 8, 1942



Gila River Relocation Center

evacuees was regularly switched to a siding and would sit for hours at a time. United States soldiers stood guard when the passengers were let out to stretch their legs.

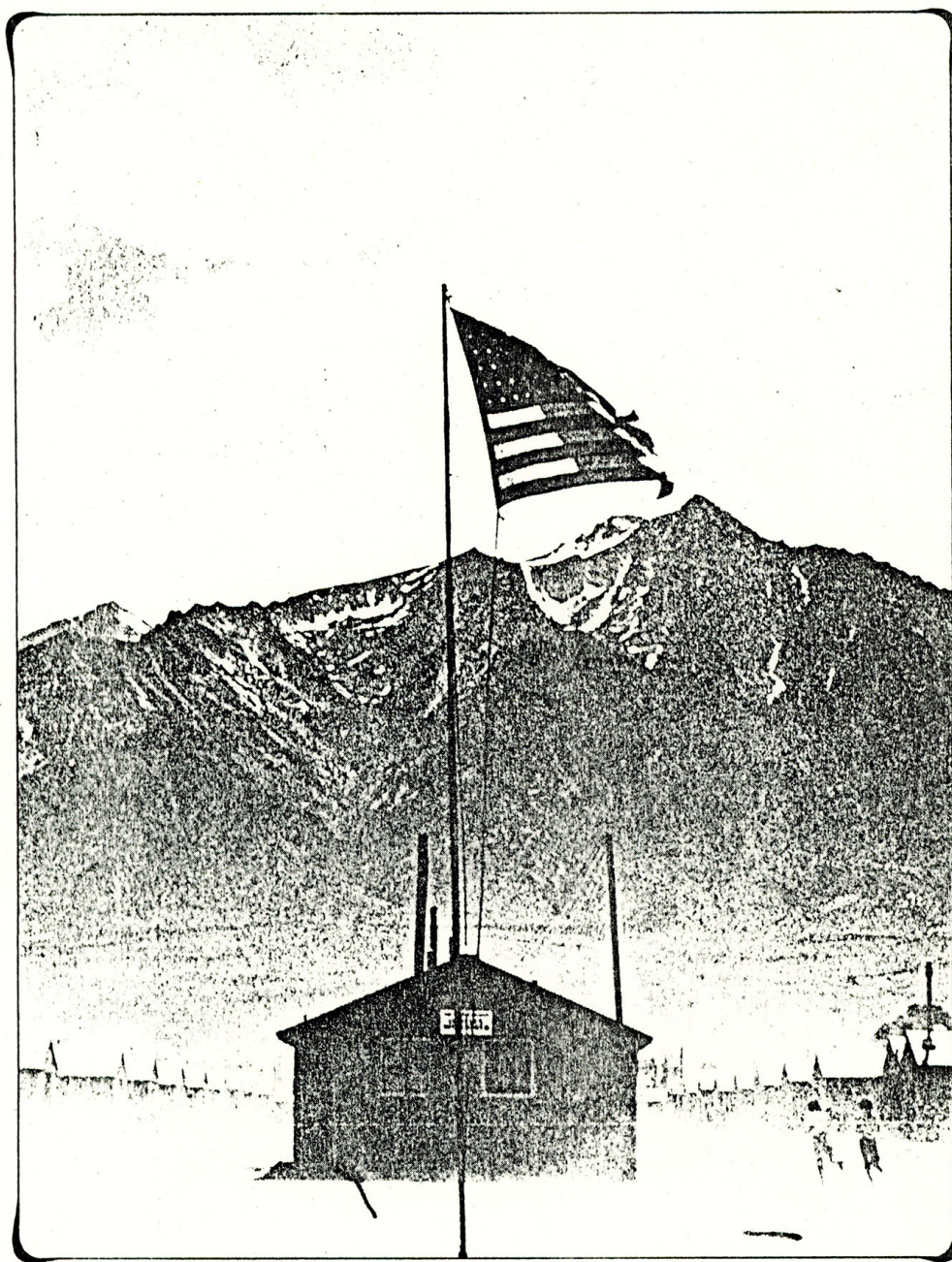
In the desert camp at Gila, the Nishiura family was assigned an end room in Block 66, Barrack No. 12. To brighten up their new home, Mrs. Nishiura tacked a piece of colored cloth on the flimsy homemade partition that helped to divide the barrack room into living and sleeping quarters.

"It was so hot and crowded in that room," Michi says, "that some nights we slept out of doors. In the beginning, every time we took a step on the plowed-up desert floor, it was like being in a flour barrel. The sandstorms were continuous. I would end up with this loose, powdery dust all over me." Michi took to watering the room with a sprinkling can to keep it cool, but she could not keep out the sand. It was hard for the Nishiuras to adjust to the landscape—tumbleweed and cactus replaced grass and trees, and scorpions and rattlesnakes replaced the farmyard cats, dogs, and other pets. In Gila the temperature blazed up to 130 degrees. It was so uncomfortable that when people went outdoors in the middle of the day, they had to carry umbrellas and tie dampened handkerchiefs around their faces to provide some relief from the sun, the heat, and the blowing sand.

Michi's first meal at camp was a plate of beans. To vary the monotony of the meals—the starchy canned foods and an endless variety of beans—Michi and her friends would eat canned hot dogs in the Block 66 mess hall and then finish the meal with a canned desert from another kitchen. It was a while before fresh foods and leafy vegetables became available.

Most of the inmates had been farmers before they were consigned to relocation centers, and once they were settled behind barbed wire, they began farming again, this time doing stoop labor. But soon after Michi's father started to work on the 7,000-acre Gila farmland, he came down with a desert sickness called Valley Fever, which kept him in the camp hospital for nearly twenty months.

The teenaged Michi never felt resentment at being in Gila. In fact, she experienced a sense of relief, a kind of liberation for the first time. "Suddenly I was with my peers. I didn't have to feel inferior. I didn't



Manzanar Relocation Center

have to feel small. Or to face the humiliation I had begun to feel more intensely in school. I was liked for what I was, not because of what my parents did or didn't do. I had finally gained a feeling of respect, and I was managing to do the kinds of things that had been denied me, back at home, as a person who was of Asian descent."

In the Nishiura's room in camp, Michi was still being brought up in the old-world Japanese tradition of spartan self-denial. "Mother never allowed us to complain. It was difficult to follow this tradition, for in American schools I had been taught to assert myself as an individual. I struggled because I was trying to be the epitome of the perfect Japanese and the perfect American at the same time."

There was a school for the Japanese-American children at Gila, but it was primitive and short staffed. Nevertheless, the Nisei teenagers put on proms, held personality contests, published yearbooks, and tried to recreate much of the world they had left behind. Michi became president of the Girl Scout troop that she organized. She set a record in Gila for selling the most \$25 war bonds to Japanese-American camp workers, most of whom earned only \$16 a month from the U.S. government.

"Back home I would never have established a Girl Scout troop or gone out for any office. At Gila, I was trying somehow to regain my self-respect. I thought the best way was to do my very best to prove that I was as good an American and as worthwhile a human being as those who were left behind." A teacher she idolized in Gila assured Michi that she would contribute more to life in America because of her experiences in the camp.

Because Michi wanted the world outside Gila to realize that the inmates were Americans, too, she organized a day-long Girl's League Convention at the camp. Invitations went out to all the state's high schools, committees sprang up, and on April 8, 1944, the camp was opened to the young conventioners. Five hundred high school girls from Phoenix, Scottsdale, Tempe, Coolidge, Peoria, and other towns in Arizona came. They had a talent show at the large outdoor amphitheater, were given a tour of the camp, and ate together in one of the mess halls. They played baseball and volleyball in the desert sand and spent part of the afternoon discussing timely issues.



A Los Angeles softball team in Manzanar Relocation Center



Third-grade class

"These young people and a number of adult educators and dignitaries came into camp and spent a whole day with us," says Michi. "They took back to their homes the news that we were as American as anybody else. It helped turn around the feeling of distrust." And it impressed Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, the member of the President's cabinet responsible for overseeing the relocation centers. In a press release, Ickes referred to what Michi and her friends had accomplished in the middle of the Arizona desert. "To me it is indicative of the way the vast majority of our citizens feel, once they have the facts, toward those of Japanese descent. . . . Little children shall lead them."

From 1942 on, concerned Quakers and educators had been pressuring the federal government to release promising young Japanese Americans from the camps to attend college, and they had been urging midwestern and eastern seaboard schools to accept them.

Mrs. Nishiura didn't approve of her daughter's hopes for higher education. "She nearly sabotaged me," Michi says. "What good is it going to do you?" Michi heard over and over again. "What you need is typing and shorthand." But in March 1944, Michi went to Phoenix to take entrance examinations for Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Just before her exam, she stepped into a drug store for a soda and was rudely turned out. The storekeeper would not serve her because she looked Japanese. It was like being back home on the farm again. The camp had shielded her from this world for a long time.

Today Michi has much difficulty recalling her arrival at Gila, but she remembers leaving. "I was full of the spirit of forgiveness and love and very grateful to the many dedicated fellow Americans who had made it possible for me to attend Mount Holyoke College on a full scholarship," she says.

Has Michi ever been back to Gila? "No. I despise deserts and the sun. For years people didn't understand why I walk in the shade." Only recently she received a letter from an admiring reader of her book, who wrote that she had just returned from Gila, and that there was nothing left but foundations and the traces of a Japanese garden.