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The Japanese American National Museum is the first museum in the United States dedicated to sharing the experience of Americans of Japanese ancestry. Through building a comprehensive collection of Japanese American objects, images and documents and through a multi-faceted program of exhibitions, educational programs, films and publications, the Museum tells the story of Japanese Americans around the country to a national and international audience.

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## **Correction to the Museum**

**Quarterly, Volume 12, Number  
3, page 3.**

The *gannen mono* sailed to  
Hawai'i on the *Scioto* in 1868,  
not the *City of Tokio*.

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# I Will Live Strong:

## New York Japanese American Experiences During World War II

by Takashi Yoshida

At the time that Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, between 2,500 and 3,000 people of Japanese ancestry were living in the New York metropolitan area. By 5:45 p.m. that day, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia had already issued an order requiring that all Japanese nationals remain at home and prohibiting them from gathering together until their status was determined.

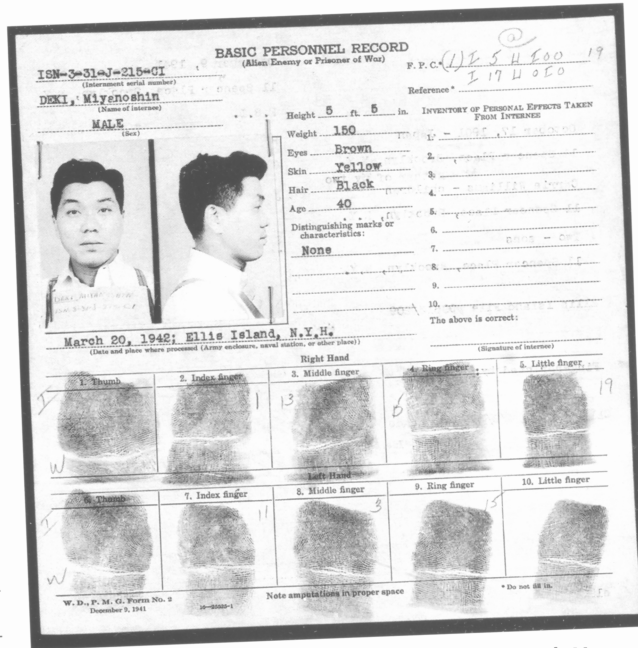
The FBI and other government agencies started to round up people of Japanese ancestry as "enemy aliens," including doctors, anti-Japanese militarism activists, and Methodist priests. By the end of the day, IZI had been arrested; they would later be taken to Ellis Island. By December 16, 1941, 277 Japanese, 217 German and 77 Italian "enemy aliens" were detained on Ellis Island.<sup>1</sup> By June 1942, the population of people of Japanese ancestry, including Nisei (U.S. Citizens, second generation Japanese Americans), in New York had been reduced to just 1,750.

On the day of the Pearl Harbor attack, FBI agents and other government officials made arresting "enemy aliens" their top priority. They had a list of enemy aliens to be arrested, and those arrested were not

allowed to bring belongings with them. Robert Iles, then serving in the Coast Guard, assisted FBI agents. Although Iles now believes that these people should not have been detained, he remembers that the Japanese were easier to pick up than Germans or Italians because they looked different, and that they were so widely hated he could carry out his orders without raising an outcry.<sup>2</sup>

After a brief investigation, those arrested were taken to Ellis Island. The ferry ran back and forth all night, taking these enemy aliens to the island.

Takeshi Haga, then an employee at Yokohama Shokin Bank, was arrested that night. He was first taken to the FBI headquarters in Foley Square, where he met between 20 and 30 arrested Japanese, all of whom were Japanese bank and trading company employees. They were then taken to Ellis Island, where Japanese detainees occupied two rooms on the island. Haga expected to be released quickly because he was involved in the anti-Japanese militarism movement and fighting for Japan's democracy. However, it took him four months to recover his freedom. According to Haga, the standard of living on the island was not bad. The rooms were well-heated and



**Deki Miyanoshin's basic personnel record, Ellis Island, New York, March 20, 1942. Courtesy of the National Archives at College Park (NRC 1997.44.14).**

10. warm; hot water was available both day and night; there was no worry about starvation; and dinner came with dessert. He was able to receive visitors for 30 minutes once a week. He was allowed to read newspapers and listen to a radio.<sup>3</sup>

Even so, the detainees were deprived of their most crucial resource: their freedom. Aisaku Kida wrote about his joy at being released in a community newsletter:

Now the ferry increases its speed. The island [Ellis Island] that was my "residence" for more than three months is getting smaller and smaller. The Statue of Liberty, which had been behind the island, now appears with its entire body . . . Just two hours ago, everything I did had been watched by guards. Guards, guards, guards. When I went to the men's room, when I went to the dining room, when I went to bed, I was always watched as an "object."<sup>4</sup>

Both Haga and Kida were able to recover their freedom within four months, but Miyanoshin Deki and Naoye Suzuki were less fortunate. Deki was arrested on December 9, 1941. The owner of a restaurant near the Navy Yard in Brooklyn, New York, he was married to an American-born woman and had three children, all also born in the United States. On January 2, 1942, his wife, Carrie, sent a telegram to him on Ellis Island, reporting the death of their eldest son, Calvin. Meanwhile, Deki was transferred to Fort Meade, Maryland, then transferred to Kooskia, Idaho, then to Ft. Missoula, Montana and yet again to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Despite several letters of appeal pointing out his family's sufferings and stressing that he was never involved in any subversive activities, he was not released until September 4, 1944. His wife described the family's financial woes in a poignant letter:

Brooklyn, March 7, 1943

Dear Deki:

I received your letter a few days ago and was very glad to hear from you and to know that you are getting better. Deki, it looks as if the kids are not going to get any help at all other than the little work that I have to support them and myself. I can't do it. The investigator was here, and he said they would allow me just what I would be getting myself. If I work five days to the week at fifty cents an hour, 6 hours a day it amounts up to \$15.00 a week and he wants me to believe that the three persons can live on that. Food is so high now and I am paying \$5.00 a week here plus \$5.00 per month for the use of gas and electricity. Their milk bill a week costs \$1.40 and they need shoes now. About every four weeks they need shoe stockings and clothing, and cleaning and pressing. And myself needs clothing and shoes, too. I never go to a movie. I don't have the money to pay for a show and I don't go to church because of no decent clothing to wear, no collection to put in church. I can't move from here as I have no money to pay for express expense and to rent a few rooms for my little family. So what shall I do? I know you have done all that you can for us from there [Fort George Meade Internment Camp]. So I must try [to reapply for civilian war assistance] again or shall I? All are well, Deki, and send love.

Very truly and keep well,  
Carrie<sup>5</sup>

Naoye Suzuki was born in the United States and spent his teens in Japan. At the time of Pearl Harbor, he was working for Mitsubishi in New York. One day early in 1942, he visited an FBI office to hand over his branch manager's belongings. FBI agents questioned him and told him that they were going to drop him off at his home; instead, they took him to Ellis Island

as an "enemy alien." Although most Japanese detainees were able to leave within three to four months because Ellis Island was a temporary detention center, Suzuki remained there for nearly two years. He had little to do inside the detention center and fought boredom every day.

One day a Japanese Methodist group visited Ellis Island, and Suzuki met Mary, who later became his wife. Mary loaned him books, including some about American history and the American Constitution. He

owned a restaurant and a Japanese grocery store in Manhattan. On the day of Pearl Harbor, a white customer came into the store solely for the purpose of cursing him. Kuwayama felt threatened and closed the store. He asked for advice from an American lawyer, who suggested that he post an enlarged photograph, in uniform, of his American-born son Yeiichi, who was serving in the U.S. Army. After he posted the photo in the window, no one visited his store merely to insult him. He hung the photo in the restaurant,

# The FBI and other government agencies started to round up people of Japanese ancestry as "enemy aliens" . . .

learned that he could not be legally detained because he was an American citizen. He wrote a letter to the Attorney General, who granted him a hearing. He eventually received an order to leave New York within 24 hours, or else be sent to jail. All of his money had been confiscated, and he was given \$22 and a one-way ticket to Chicago. Deeply wounded by this experience, it was more than 50 years before Suzuki was able to visit Ellis Island again.<sup>6</sup>

Not all people of Japanese ancestry on the East Coast endured detention. There were some who were never detained or bothered by the authorities and whose lives did not change much even after Pearl Harbor. After Sadao Otani heard on the radio that Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, he changed into a suit and sat down to await the arrival of the FBI. He waited in vain. Although the male heads of all the other Japanese families who lived in the same apartment building were taken to Ellis Island, FBI agents did not take Sadao into custody. His wife, Isako, thinks that the FBI did not arrest Sadao because he was one of the most distinguished doctors in the United States. He was working at Mt. Sinai Hospital, and the hospital provided him with room and board after Pearl Harbor to insure his safety.<sup>7</sup>

Senzo Kuwayama, who became an American citizen in 1901, was also able to maintain his freedom. He

as well. Although Caucasian people stopped eating in his restaurant during the first three months of the war, they gradually came back, and Senzo was able to avoid having to close the restaurant.<sup>8</sup>

Although there were few incidents of violent crimes committed against people of Japanese ancestry in New York, social and economic discrimination increased after Pearl Harbor. The assets of Japanese

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### By CLAIR PRICE

For the first time since 1904, a detention camp of the kind is being set up in the United States. It is being set up at Ellis Island, New York, for the purpose of detaining Japanese-Americans who are considered "enemy aliens."

### Harbor Camp for Enemy Aliens

Japanese "New Yorkers" on their way to Ellis Island.

Their own country. The men of the camp are being held in a building which was built by the Army in 1904 for the purpose of detaining Japanese-Americans who are considered "enemy aliens."

### WINTER SPORTS SCHEDULE

Though skiing is sport that undoubtedly fits the winter season, it is not the only sport that can be enjoyed in the winter. There is a wide variety of winter sports that can be enjoyed in the winter. Some of the most popular winter sports are skiing, ice skating, and ice hockey.

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Marlin Shavers company reports that a box of Marlin Blades gives them a clean, smooth shave for 3 months or more! Every blade guaranteed by the Marlin Company. Double edge, 14 DOUBLES for \$18 for 25¢. Single Edge 144 for 25¢.

12.

Americans were frozen, and they were allowed to withdraw only one hundred dollars a month. They were forbidden to own cameras, short-wave radios, firearms, and other kinds of weapons. When they changed their residence or traveled, they had to ask for permission from the police. They had to register as enemy aliens and were always required to carry the so-called "pink book," and identification card. Otherwise, the police could take them into custody.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Japanese Americans were subject to much greater discrimination than people of Italian or German descent. Japanese Americans, for instance, were forbidden to join the "New York at War" parade, held on June 13, 1942. Nearly 500,000 people, including German and Italian Americans "as well as those of almost every other national and racial strain" participated in the march, which attracted 2.5 million spectators.<sup>10</sup>

Mayor La Guardia, who was born two years after his parents emigrated to the United States from Italy, regarded Japanese Americans as wholly untrustworthy, and he disliked the government's idea of relocating the incarcerated people to resettle in New York. In a letter to the Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, La Guardia wrote, "I want to formally record my protest against the present plan to take these people [people of Japanese ancestry] from concentration camps and locate them to cities in the East."<sup>11</sup>

In order to confront widespread anti-Japanese hysteria and discrimination against people of Japanese ancestry, at least two active interracial organizations were established in New York after Pearl Harbor: the New York Church Committee for Japanese Work (NYCCJW) and the Japanese American Committee for Democracy. These organizations helped Japanese (Japanese American) families whose husbands and fathers were in custody and attempted to educate an American public that falsely believed all "Japanese" to be agents of the Japanese military.

The New York Japanese American Directory of 1948-49 includes high praise for Edwin Iglehart, an organizer of the NYCCJW:

In the turbulent wake of Pearl Harbor, New York Japanese Americans were grateful to find a friend and humanitarian in a world suddenly turned hostile. The story of Dr. Edwin Iglehart, who personally effected the release from Ellis Island of some 149 internees, for whom he not only found employment, but also provided food and shelter through the Church Committee for Japanese Work which he organized, is dear to the hearts of all U.S. Japanese . . . <sup>12</sup>

Iglehart was not the only humanitarian New Yorker who helped Japanese Americans during the war. Asae Konokawa still thanks Kenneth Simpson, then a Republican Congressman, who with his wife, asked the police chief to protect Asae, her husband, and their son after Pearl Harbor.<sup>13</sup> Ichiro Shirato and his wife expressed their gratitude to their fellow students at the Union Theological Seminary for their protection.<sup>14</sup> Isako Otani is grateful for her child's school principal, who told the entire student body that the attack on Pearl Harbor had nothing to do with the students of Japanese ancestry studying there. Just as those detained at Ellis Island vividly recall their suffering, those who received aid from their fellow New Yorkers still hold deeply-rooted memories of this crucial help.<sup>15</sup>

On August 14, the day when the Japanese government surrendered to the Allied Powers, Mayor La Guardia told the people of New York in a radio broadcast:

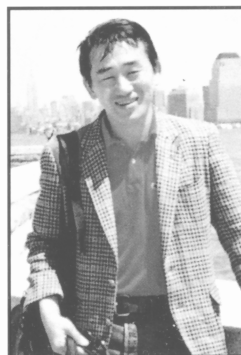
We have defeated and destroyed forever the Nazis and the Fascists and now the Japs. Yes, it is a moment of joy and rejoicing . . . To those families who are in mourning, I extend my heartfelt sympathy. We pray for those boys who have given so much . . . I

know my city; I know the people of my city. I know what they have gone through since December 1941.<sup>16</sup>

Did “those boys” include the Nisei soldiers fighting for the United States? When the mayor remembered “those families who are in mourning,” he probably did not have in mind mothers like Sato Takahashi, who published this letter to console herself after losing her only son in Europe:

When you told me that you would become a soldier, your mother’s heart was greatly shocked. You were my only child, and you decided to become a soldier without being aware of your mother’s mind. I was wordless. I could not move my lips. My cheek was shivering. Sorrow rushed to my mind, and I could not help it. You came close to me and held my hands. You spoke to me with a shivering voice probably because you sensed what was in my mind: “Mother, I have been thinking about this since the day of Pearl Harbor. I surely understand your feelings. But if we think about our future, this will be the only option that I have.” I still remember your eyes having fire inside them. Since you lost your father when you were young, you were much more mature than other 19-year-old boys. Your love toward myself and your two younger sisters always reflects your attitude. You always behaved yourself and never asked for what I could not offer you. I wish you had troubled me more. . .

On the day of your leaving, you put your hands on my shoulder and said: “Mother, don’t cry even if something happens to me.” I can still hear your voice. My son, I won’t be overwhelmed by the sorrow. I will live strong. I will not make your service in the Italian front in vain. Your sacrifice will bear fruit someday. Sacrifices that you and other young people made must not be wasted in vain.<sup>17</sup>



Takashi Yoshida is a historian who is currently studying for his Ph.D. in history at Columbia University. He is also an adjunct professor of history at Merymount Manhattan College and Pace University. He has published articles on World War II history in scholarly journals.

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- 4 *Nyu Yoku Jiji*, vol. 2, May 1944, p. 3.
- 5 “Records relating to Japanese Civilian Internees During WWII, 1942-1946,” Record Group 389, Box 20, National Archives.
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- 7 Interview with Isako Otani by Takashi Yoshida on October 2, 1996.
- 8 Masataka Kamide, *Kuwayama Senzo okina monogatari* [The biography of Mr. Senzo Kuwayama] (Kyoto: Tanko shinsha, 1963), p.4.
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- 10 “Millions Hail Marches Here; Will to Win is the Keynote,” *The New York Times*, 14 June 1942, p. 1.
- 11 Fiorello La Guardia, “To Harold Ickes,” 11 April 1944. The mayor also wrote a letter to Ickes with stronger tone dated on April 23, 1944, *LaGuardia Subject Files*, roll #107, pp. 626-7 and p. 629, Municipal Archives of the City of New York.
- 12 *New York Japanese American Directory, 1948-49*, “Shiryo bunken” [historical materials], p. 14.
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