

Japanese American internment camps

In 1942, Yoshiko Uchida—a teenager living with her parents and her older sister in Berkeley, California—was suddenly sent to an internment camp. Uchida was considered a Nisei, a person born in the United States with Japanese parents. In her later years, Uchida wrote *Desert Exile*, a memoir recalling her upbringing, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, her family's internment, and her life after World War II. In the excerpt, Uchida describes her experiences before and during her bus ride to the internment camp (paragraphs 1–13) as well as what the camp was like once she arrived (paragraphs 14–26).

Excerpts of *Desert Exile*

Yoshiko Uchida

(1) We could have been spared our anxiety and agonizing had we known trucks would be available to transport our baggage to camp. But it is entirely possible the omission of this information in our instructions was intentional to discourage us from taking too much baggage with us.

(2) The night before we left, our Swiss neighbors invited us to dinner. It was a fine feast served with our neighbors' best linens, china, and silverware. With touching concern they did their best to make our last evening in Berkeley as pleasant as possible.

(3) I sat on the piano bench that had been in our home until a few days before and thought of the times I had sat on it when we entertained our many guests. Now, because of the alarming succession of events that even then seemed unreal, I had become a guest myself in our neighbors' home.

(4) When we returned to our dark empty house, our Norwegian neighbors came to say goodbye. The two girls brought gifts for each of us and hugged us goodbye.

(5) "Come back soon," they said as they left.

(6) But none of us knew when we would ever be back. We lay down on our mattresses and tried to sleep, knowing it was our last night in our house on Stuart Street.

(7) Neat and conscientious to the end, my mother wanted to leave our house in perfect condition. That last morning she swept the entire place, her footsteps echoing sadly throughout the vacant house. Our Swiss neighbors brought us a cheering breakfast on bright-colored dishes and then drove us to the First Congregational Church designated as the Civil Control Station where we were to report.

(8) We were too tense and exhausted to fully sense the terrible wrench of leaving our home, and when we arrived at the church, we said our goodbyes quickly. . . .

(9) It wasn't until I saw the armed guards standing at each doorway, their bayonets mounted and ready, that I realized the full horror of the situation. Then my knees sagged, my stomach began to churn, and I very nearly lost my breakfast.

(10) Hundreds of Japanese Americans were crowded into the great hall of the church and the sound of their voices pressed close around me. Old people sat quietly, waiting with patience and resignation for whatever was to come. Mothers tried to comfort crying infants, young children ran about the room, and some teenagers tried to put up a brave front by making a social opportunity of the occasion. . . .

(11) Before long, we were told to board the buses that lined the street outside, and the people living nearby came out of their houses to watch the beginning of our strange migration. Most of them probably watched with curious and morbid fascination, some perhaps even with a little sadness. But many may have been relieved and glad to see us go.

(12) Mama, Kay, and I climbed onto one of the buses and it began its one-way journey down familiar streets we had traveled so often in our own car. . . . Some of the people on the bus talked nervously, one or two wept, but most sat quietly, keeping their thoughts to themselves and their eyes on the window, as familiar landmarks slipped away one by one.

(13) As we rode down the highway, the grandstand of the Tanforan racetrack gradually came into view, and I could see a high barbed wire fence surrounding the entire area, pierced at regular intervals by tall guard towers. This was to be our temporary home until the government could construct inland camps far removed from the West Coast.

(14) The bus made a sharp turn and swung slowly into the racetrack grounds. As I looked out the window for a better view, I saw armed guards close and bar the barbed wire gates behind us. We were in the Tanforan Assembly Center now and there was no turning back.

(15) As soon as we got off the bus, we were directed to an area beneath the grandstand where we registered and filled out a series of forms. . . . We were to be housed in Barrack 16, Apartment 40. Fortunately, some friends who had arrived earlier found us and offered to help us locate our quarters. It had rained the day before and the hundreds of people who had trampled on the track had turned it into a miserable mass of slippery mud. We made our way on it carefully, helping my mother who was dressed just as she would have been to go to church. She wore a hat, gloves, her good coat, and her Sunday shoes, because she would not have thought of venturing outside our house dressed in any other way.

(16) Everywhere there were black tar-papered barracks that had been hastily erected to house the 8,000 Japanese Americans of the area who had been uprooted from their homes. Barrack 16,

however, was not among them, and we couldn't find it until we traveled half the length of the track and gone beyond it to the northern rim of the racetrack compound.

(17) Finally one of our friends called out, "There it is, beyond that row of eucalyptus trees." Barrack 16 was not a barrack at all, but a long stable raised a few feet off the ground with a broad ramp the horses had used to reach their stalls. Each stall was now numbered and ours was number 40. That the stalls should have been called "apartments" was a euphemism so ludicrous it was comical.

(18) When we reached stall number 40, we pushed open the narrow door and looked uneasily into the vacant darkness. The stall was about ten by twenty feet and empty except for three folded Army cots lying on the floor. Dust, dirt, and wood shavings covered the linoleum that had been laid over manure-covered boards, the smell of horses hung in the air, and the whitened corpses of many insects still clung to the hastily white-washed walls.

(19) High on either side of the entrance were two small windows which were our only source of daylight. The stall was divided into two sections by Dutch doors worn down by teeth marks, and each stall in the stable was separated from the adjoining one only by rough partitions that stopped a foot short of the sloping roof. That space, while perhaps a good source of ventilation for the horses, deprived us of all but visual privacy, and we couldn't even be sure of that because of the crevices and knotholes in the dividing walls.

(20) Nothing in the camp was ready. Everything was only half-finished. I wondered how much the nation's security would have been threatened had the Army permitted us to remain in our homes a few more days until the camps were adequately prepared for our occupancy by families.

(21) The sun was going down as we started along the muddy track, and a cold piercing wind swept in from the bay. When we arrived, there were six long weaving lines of people waiting to get into the mess hall. . . .

(22) Shivering in the cold, we pressed close together trying to shield Mama from the wind. As we stood in what seemed a breadline for the destitute, I felt degraded, humiliated, and overwhelmed with a longing for home. And I saw the unutterable sadness on my mother's face.

(23) Once we got inside the gloomy cavernous mess hall, I saw hundreds of people eating at wooden picnic tables, while those who had already eaten were shuffling aimlessly over the wet cement floor. When I reached the serving table and held out my plate, a cook reached into a dishpan full of canned sausages and dropped two onto my plate with his fingers. Another man gave me a boiled potato and a piece of butterless bread.

(24) With 5,000 people to be fed, there were few unoccupied tables, so we separated from our friends and shared a table with an elderly man and a young family with two crying babies. No one at the table spoke to us, and even Mama could seem to find no friendly word to offer as she normally would have done. We tried to eat, but the food wouldn't go down.

(25) "Let's get out of here," my sister suggested.

(26) Once back in our stall, we found it no less depressing, for there was only a single electric light bulb dangling from the ceiling, and a one-inch crevice at the top of the north wall admitted a steady draft of the cold night air. We sat huddled on our cots, bundled in our coats, too cold and miserable even to talk. My sister and I worried about Mama, for she wasn't strong and had recently been troubled with neuralgia which could easily be aggravated by the cold. She in turn was worrying about us, and we all worried and wondered about Papa.

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