

OPINION

Minidoka in my bones: The generational trauma of Japanese American incarceration

By Wendy Tokuda

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Tama Inouye, right, the author's mother, in 1942 at the temporary "Assembly Center" at the fairgrounds in Puyallup. Japanese Americans were taken to the center and then transferred to incarceration camps
<https://pages.pagesuite.com/f/7/f7fcdf52-96b5-4b1b-b5b6-be5889cb6298/page.pdf#page=1&zoom=auto,-13,1649s>

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My parents met in a prison camp called the Minidoka Internment Center in the desolate Idaho desert, far from their homes in Seattle. They were among the 120,000 people of Japanese descent locked up during World War II because the government suspected they might be spies for Japan. My parents were not spies, but it did not matter because there was no due process; two

thirds of incarcerated were citizens, but "A Jap is a Jap," remarked General John DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Fund.

My mom was a librarian in the camp, and when my dad saw her, he started checking out a lot of books. The armed guards and the barbed

wire fence are long gone, but the canal where they took long walks is still there.

My mom, Tama Inouye, was a senior at the University of Washington when she was evacuated to Minidoka. She received a “Notice of Incomplete” from the university while she was at the camp, as if not completing was within her control. My father, George Tokuda, was a young, ambitious pharmacist. He lost everything, including his drugstore in Seattle. When he was released, no bank would give him a loan, so a dear Chinese American friend lent him cash to buy his own store back.

My brother, Butchie, was born in Minidoka. At the time, they had no idea he was severely intellectually disabled. It’s impossible to know the cause of his disability, but his life always felt overshadowed by the war.

Eighty years ago on Feb. 19, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 and authorized the incarceration. Japanese American communities always hold “Day of Remembrance” ceremonies on this day, but this anniversary comes at a historic time, as America wrestles with a racial reckoning.

The hatred that built the camps is still with us. The FBI is investigating a wave of bomb threats at historically Black colleges. The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism reported a 339% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in 2021, compared with the year before. Eighty years ago, we saw what can happen when fear and bigotry are whipped into a frenzy, but even at a low simmer, they cause pervasive damage.

I was born five years after the camps closed and grew up steeped in my parents’ feelings of anxiety and shame.

My mother saved a government handout she was given when she left Minidoka: “Helpful Hints for a Successful Relocation,” which

included advice such as: Do not gather in groups on the streets, don’t speak Japanese in public, remember that others may not recognize you as an American, and always work to promote a better understanding of Japanese Americans.

These instructions served as a blueprint on how incarcerated were to raise their children. To prove we were good citizens, our parents pushed us to excel in school.

Overachieving had its benefits: I was able to go to college and had a successful, professional career, becoming the first Asian American to anchor prime-time newscasts in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I retired after 40 years. I am proof of the American promise, and yet I can still feel Minidoka in my bones; the fear of making mistakes or the feeling like I am somehow in trouble.

When I did news reports on the incarceration, I was besieged with hate mail. Every Pearl Harbor Day, for years, I would get racist letters. The first time I heard the term “kung flu,” it felt like a slap. When I hear comments about all Muslims being terrorists, a dark fear comes over me.

Minidoka is now a National Historic Site and for me, it is a sacred place alive with the echoes of my parents and grandparents. This is why it’s important that the Friends of Minidoka and the National Park Conservation Association have preserved Minidoka and all its lessons. We must continue to protect Minidoka and the stories of the survivors and descendants. It reminds us how fragile freedom is, even in the land of the free.

Wendy Tokuda is an award-winning journalist who grew up in Seattle and became the first Asian American prime-time anchor in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she worked for 40 years. Her family was incarcerated at Minidoka.