Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family Study Guide

Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family by Yoshiko Uchida

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Japanese-Americans have been part of United States' history for centuries. Early 20th century Japanese immigrants to the United States, the Issei, are important contributors to American life and built communities across the country, particularly in San Francisco. Their children, the Nisei or second-generation Japanese Americans grow up conceiving of themselves primarily as Americans, speaking English as their first language and seeking to fully merge into American culture. This is the nature of Japanese American life in the 1930s where Desert Exile begins its story.

The author, Yoshiko Uchida, and her family live in San Francisco. Her father, Dwight, and her mother, Iku are Issei immigrants, both of whom becomes familiar with American culture in Kyoto and are chosen as each other's spouses by American professors at Doshisha University in Japan. Dwight and Iku are both Christians and spend much of their lives as devout members of their local church. Yoshiko and her older sister Keiko are raised in a happy home. Their family is fairly well-to-do and Yoshiko's parents do not discourage her or Keiko from integrating.

The primary event of Desert Exile is the internment of Japanese Americans by the United States government during World War II. Within weeks of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, thousands of Japanese Americans, many of whom are United States citizens, are rounded up and sent to concentration camps across the United States. While many accounts of internment have been recorded, Yoshiko gives her account in Desert Exile in order to communicate her own experience of oppression during World War II and to contribute one more perspective to teach Americans to safeguard their rights so that such mistreatment never happens again.

Desert Exile is short, composed of eight chapters and an epilogue, most of which concern internment. Chapter 1, The House on Grove Street, introduces the Uchida family and explains their origin, community, personalities, occupations and interests. Chapter 2, On Being Japanese and American, introduces an important theme of the book—the Nisei's divided identity between being Japanese and American, and their feeling of a lack of identity, since many do not know Japanese but are not accepted by white America. It also discusses the relationship between the Issei and the Nisei.

Chapter 3, Pearl Harbor, begins with the attack on Pearl Harbor and their hurried and irrational reaction of the United States' government and many American citizens to Japanese Americans, questioning their loyalty to the United States and treating them as a fifth column. Chapter 4, Evacuation, covers the evacuation of the Uchida family after Dwight has been taken away. The Uchida women have to pack up their things before being shipped off by the American government.

Chapters 5 and 6, A Horse Stall for Four and City behind Barbed Wire covers the Uchida family's stay at the Tanforan concentration camp and Chapters 7 and 8, Topaz: City of Dust and Topaz: Winter's Despair, cover their transfer to Topaz in Utah and their eventual release. The Epilogue looks back on Yoshiko's experiences, discusses what

has happened to the Uchida family since being released and explains Yoshiko's rationale for writing the book.

Chapter 1, The House above Grove Street

Chapter 1, The House above Grove Street Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1 begins with the author reminiscing about growing up as a second-generation Japanese child of Japanese immigrants before World War II. The author's family lives in Berkeley, California, above Grove Street. The only thing unusual about the author's childhood in America, in fact, is that her family is Japanese-American. Somehow, their family is allowed to live in a white neighborhood, despite racial discrimination by local realtors against Asian immigrants. Despite living through the depression, the author's family never notices it, due to her parents' thrift and self-denial.

The author's father, Dwight Takashi Uchida, immigrates to California in 1906, landing in San Francisco three months after the great earthquake. He finds a job working for a Japanese entrepreneur, M. Furuya. In 1917 he marries Iku Umegaki, who is sent from Japan the previous year to marry him. They have been matched by some professors at the Christian university they attended in Kyoto, Doshisha University. The author imagines that her mother's decision to leave Japan is difficult, but she trusts her professors' advice.

Most of the Uchida's family friends have less secure lives, because the author's father is salaried. Most have trouble surviving, speaking little English. However, both of his parents work extremely hard and know what poverty is like. They feel compassion for those in need, despite not being wasteful; for instance, they provide meals to lonely and homesick students from Japan. However the author's sister, Keiko, and the author often find the students annoying. Some are seminarians, others business visitors.

The author's—Yoshiko's—parents are generous but always enrich their children's lives. Yoshiko and Keiko have friends, go to church, see theatre performances, museums, and so on. The children also often take piano lessons and sing. They are also fortunate enough to have a grandparent living in the United States, among the only Nisei (second generation Japanese) to have the opportunity. Her grandmother, Katsu Uchida, is a devout Christian and helps care for the house and her daughter, Yoshiko's aunt, a semi-invalid. She studies the Bible every day.

Yoshiko's father has a railroad pass that allows their family to take long trips; they see the Grand Canyon and New Orleans. They also later take a trip to Japan, when Yoshiko is twelve.

Yoshiko's father is a businessman in every sense, energetic, and practical, and doing everything fast. However, Yoshiko's mother is precisely the opposite. The two

compliment one another well. While their marriage is arranged, they are very happy together.

Chapter 2, On Being Japanese and American

Chapter 2, On Being Japanese and American Summary and Analysis

Yoshiko is four years younger than her sister Keiko, whom she often thinks can do everything better than she can. While they sometimes fight, they usually get along. They are both Nisei, however, which always separates them from their classmates. Although the Uchida's home is distinctly Japanese, their parents are not hardcore traditionalists. Contact with white professors at Doshisha gives them more of a Western outlook. Yet at home they primarily speak in Japanese. Yoshiko's parents are bilingual. Their meals are often a mixture of East and West.

Issei women do not know how to drive; most food is ordered by telephone from a Japanese grocer. Yoshiko's mother is about staying clean and is an excellent seamstress. Yoshiko notes that she is often sick, despite her mother's good health habits, although she wonders if much of her sickness is not psychosomatic. Yoshiko's mother is not very "robust" either.

The Uchidas observe a number of Japanese customs, such as March 3rd's Dollas Festival Day. The family possess a number of folk toys and charms, though she sometimes includes American dolls. Funerals are elaborate as well, much as they are in Japan.

The Uchidas attend the Japanese Independent Congregational Church of Oakland and the church plays a large role in their lives. A small group of Japanese students founds the church in 1904. They are self-supporting and self-governing, even operating their own dormitory for visiting students. Despite marrying and raising families, the Issei keep the church at the center of their lives. Yoshiko's parents never miss Sunday services and Yoshiko and Keiko never miss Sunday school unless they str sick. The school is conducted in English.

The adult service is in Japanese and lasts well over an hour. The sermons are very tedious. Yoshiko and Keiko have to amuse themselves outside until the service is finished. They often have to stay afterwards, because their father is a deacon. He gives much of his time to the church, as does their mother. While they are Christian, they mix their Buddhist philosophy into their Christianity. They have both a Protestant work ethic along with strong respect for teachers and superiors.

The Uchidas first loyalty is to the Christian God, however, not the Emperor of Japan and their loyalty to American traditions, such as the American Constitution, is strong. While Yoshiko's parents are United States residents, they are never naturalized, even when it becomes possible in 1952.

Despite their parents' Japanese identity, Yoshiko and Keiko only think of themselves as Americans and English is their native tongue. They even refuse to go to Japanese language school. They do not want to focus on how different they are. Yoshiko wants more than anything to be accepted as a white American. She is imbued with the "melting post" mentality.

Discrimination affects Yoshiko's sense of personal worth. For some time, she never speaks to a white person, unless one of them speaks to her first. In elementary school, feeling excluded is difficult, but it is even worse in high school. She is often singled out because teachers praise Japanese-American students for their consistently high grades. Discrimination causes her to want to distance herself from her Japanese heritage.

Yoshiko is so desperate to get out of high school that she graduates in two and a half years, entering Berkeley at sixteen, immature and naïve. Her alienation is even greater there. Most Nisei avoid campus social events and join the two Japanese American social clubs. Yoshiko dates only Nisei in college and never goes out socially with a white man until years after World War II. Her girlfriends are also mostly Nisei. She is at that time mostly content in her segregated Nisei world. However, her family keeps several white friends. The Nisei Christian community is another important source of social contact.

Keiko, for whatever reason, decides to go to Mills Colege in Oakland, When she graduates with a degree in child development, she cannot find work as a nursery school teacher, eventually finding a job as a "governess" to a white three-year old child. However, she is not alone in finding few opportunities for jobs. Most Nisei men prior to World War II graduate from good schools with good degrees but have a hard time finding jobs in their field. The Nisei are rejected as inferior Americans and as inferior Japanese. This is the social climate when the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor.

Chapter 3, Pearl Harbor

Chapter 3, Pearl Harbor Summary and Analysis

On Sunday, December 7th, 1941, it is a rare Sunday when the Uchidas have no guests for dinner. That evening, the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor. Papa assures the family that it is only a lone fanatic. They do not realize that this means war. Yet after a few hours, the FBI picks up a number of Japanese men. The FBI come by their house and when they return, Yoshiko's father goes willingly.

They are all afraid and, for five days, they have no idea what has happened to him. They are then notified that the men are being held at the Immigration Detention Quarters in San Franscisco. He says he is ok, and as soon as they are allowed, they go to visit him; when they arrive, he tells them that he is to be shipped to an internment camp in Missoula, Montana. The community supports them and Keiko has to learn to manage business affairs. From the camp, Yoshiko's father gives Keiko instructions. In his letters, he often encourages them to stay hopeful.

It turns out that the men are to be regularly shipped around before they can become familiar with their camps, but Yoshiko's father is allowed to stay behind. The Uchidas hope for his release.

Chapter 4, Evacuation

Chapter 4, Evacuation Summary and Analysis

At the start of the war, Keiko has to quit her job to run the household and Yoshiko continues to attend classes, despite the dwindling Nisei population. There are rumors of an "evacuation" which are in fact trips to concentration camps. There is little violence against the Japanese, but a classmate of Yoshiko's is shot to death by anti-Japanese fanatics.

While they have endured discrimination before, the Uchida women now understand discrimination in the racial sense, according to their faces. Most Nisei ahve never been to Japan and tried to prove it to white Americans by participating in the war effort. As time goes on, however, anti-Japanese groups, particularly economic competitors, gain more influence, particularly when aided by the media. Many unfounded rumors circulate and open bigotry increases. Presidential reports trump up claims that Japanese-Americans are extraordinarily loyal to Japan. The severe US losses in the Pacific early on make evacuation a tragic reality.

By the end of February, Yoshiko's father's letters begin to express concern over mass evacuation. By 1942 it is clear that Japanese Americans will be interned. On February 19th, FDR issues Executive Order 9066 authorizing the secretary of war to set up concentration camps, directed solely at the Japanese—not Germans or Italians. 120,000 men, women and children of Japanese ancestry are rounded up by the middle of March. This clearly violates the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States' Constitution. Most Issei are imprisoned and their organizations destroyed. They can only cooperate "under protest."

Yoshiko and Keiko are furious that their country would deprive them of their rights, but their respect for authority prevents them from resisting. They think they best help their country by cooperating. Many Japanese lose everything from such obedience, including huge fortunes. The military tell remaining Japanese Americans that they can voluntarily evacuate to restricted zones. Yoshiko's father worries about their safety. Eventually all Asians in Berkeley (around 1320 persons) are ordered evacuated to the Tanforan Assembly Center. The Uchida family becomes Family Number 13453.

They are given ten days to evacuate. Yoshiko's mother has accumulated a vast number of items and money that they have to distribute. They have to pack everything or throw it out. The Churches are extremely helpful in aiding evacuating families, as are Swiss and Norwegian families in the area. However, they have trouble storing their new Buick sedan and finding a place to house their dog. The people that buy the dog never contact them and Laddie dies only a few weeks later. As for Yoshiko's degree, she is given final grades based on her midterms and all Nisei are on indefinite leave.

Yoshiko realizes that her mother is suffering terribly from being cut off from her family. She struggles to keep her letters and photos from home. Eventually, the Uchidas have to pack and their neighbors say goodbye. Dealing with actual evacuation is difficult. Hundreds of Japanese Americans are crowded away; the people are devastated. As the Uchidas ride down the highway, they can see the barbed wire fences approaching. They then arrive in the Tanforan Assembly Center.

Chapter 5, Tanforan, A Horse Stall for Four

Chapter 5, Tanforan, A Horse Stall for Four Summary and Analysis

When the Uchidas arrive at Tanforan, they register and are assigned living quarters in Barrack 16, Apartment 40. 5000 Japanese Americans are in the camp and there are barracks for all of them, save Barrack 16, which is a stable. The Uchidas are placed in a stall for horses. However, other Japanese help them clean it up. Nothing in the camp is prepared for the prisoners, however, which makes things more difficult.

Yoshiko feels humiliated and degraded and she finds that at Tanforan they wait in many lines. Their stall is small and has a single light bulb, with a small crevice to let in air. Eventually their belongings arrive; this makes things much better. Many types of people live in the stalls, including an artist, a barber, and a dentist. They will all become intimately acquainted.

The latrines are disgusting, with no doors. The lack of privacy is an embarrassing hardship, particularly for the elderly women. In the first few weeks of camps, everything is erratic and in short supply. Many necessities are in short supply and each family is responsible for themselves. Laundry rooms are in constant use. The food at the camp is heavy in starch and so Yoshiko writes to her non-Japanese friends to ask for other foods. Eventually other mess halls are opened, but they do not improved the quality of the food save in the main mess hall. However, by the time the Uchidas left, Tanforan has great food.

One of the first tasks at Tanforan is to make their living quarters comfortable, and the Uchidas have much help because Yoshiko's father is elsewhere. After being in Tanforan for a week, they receive a telegram from Yoshiko's father telling them he has been released on parole and will join them in camp. He has been released due to his community service and affidavits from friends.

Yoshiko's father returns the next day and the Uchidas have a tearful reunion. He is full of stories from his five-month internment and they start to spend many evenings with friends. During their initial internment, Yoshiko's father and the other prisoners are treated as dangerous enemies and are stripped of all their possessions when they arrive in their camp. They are housed in very tight households and have to do chores. Their American captors encourage them to govern themselves and Yoshiko's father is elected chairman of the welfare committee and he establishes a church. Many of the men there teach classes, but Yoshiko's father also has to arrange funerals. All letters are subject to censorship. When winter comes, the camp becomes incredibly cold. However, each day, the men get together for calisthenics and continue their disciplined life. Yoshiko's father keeps his friends for a long time.

Chapter 6, Tanforan, City behind Barbed Wire

Chapter 6, Tanforan, City behind Barbed Wire Summary and Analysis

After three weeks, the Uchidas are allowed their first visitors and as time goes on many of their non-Japanese friends come by to offer support and bring them food and other items. Often the food allows the Uchidas and their friends to have snack parties.

In the camp, a committee is formed, the Committee on American Principles and Fair Play, which is supposed to support the American Constitution and defend the Bill of Rights because they know that depriving a minority of rights set a dangerous precedent. The head of the committee, Dr. Fishder, works to dispel false rumors, writing several articles for the Christian Century. They help get the Nisei back in school through the Student Relocation Committee. Outside the camp, the American Friends Service Committee works hard to defend the interests of Japanese Americans throughout the war.

Tanforan is eventually home to 8000 Japanese Americans and the people start to form social institutions. A Christian and a Buddhist Church are the first to be established. Many come for spiritual sustenance. The people of Tanforan start a post office, a hospital, a library and a camp newspaper. They also put together recreation and education programs, developing many activities, such as over one hundred softball teams. Hobby shows are sponsored as well, displaying the intelligence and patience of the Japanese Americans. They creat a number of beautiful items and practical items as well.

Keiko organizes a nursery school and recruits friends to help; three more nursery schools open as time goes on. Some adults are difficult to handle but most take kindly to the routine of the nursery. Yoshiko never feels quite at home taking care of the children. However, important jobs in the camp are paid for, and eventually Yoshiko applies to teach elementary school. At this time, schools for children from ages six to eighteen are formed. Yoshiko teaches second grade and mostly by instinct. She decides that she would like to work to become a teacher when she is released. She also finishes school while in camp, receiving her degree in the mail.

When June ends, forty percent of Tanforan residents teach or go to school. Open Houses are held and PTA groups organized. Many mass activities go smoothly but others do not.

The weather at Tanforan, while not far from San Francisco Bay, is very different. Wind tears through camp regularly and illness spreads. Yoshiko has a Vitamin B deficiency. They are all troubled by stomach disorders. When they are sick, they have to stay in

their stalls or in the hospital. However, again, the food improves over time and the forms of recreation and education give life some order, along with self-government. The Issei are able to vote in the United States for the first time; they do not waste the opportunity. However, eventually the Army orders that only American citizens can vote and hold office.

Eventually their Constitution is approved and thirty-eight candidates are elected to their legislature though the Army eventually dissolves the government. No one really minds since interest in politics has subsided. The Americans put the camp under increasing surveillance and the FBI appear on June 23rd, searching some stalls. Morale is negatively affected. Rumors circulate of their removal to inland "relocation centers."

By July 11th, the camp can have scrip books and they also receive a clothing allowance. In mid-July they receive their first paychecks and laundromats and barbershops are added in late summer. Yoshiko and her friends often go for walks after supper.

After three months of living together, the lack of privacy gets on Yoshiko's nerves. When a vacancy open up, Keiko and Yoshiko apply to live in it and they are then able to do so. Yoshiko's mother wants more privacy as well. Boredom is also a problem, so Yoshiko and Keiko take first aid classes and sing in the church choir.

It is eventually announced that they will be moved between September 15th and 30th. They do not know where but they will be moved in small contingents. Rumors spread, multiply and mutate. They are worried they will be separated from their friends. Schools close on September 4th. Over the next days they have to pack their possessions, which have grown in number. However, they have Papa this time to help them. They find out that the first contingent is to move to the Central Utah Relocation Center. Dealing with others leaving is difficult but they will all eventually end up in Utah.

Chapter 7, Topaz, City of Dust

Chapter 7, Topaz, City of Dust Summary and Analysis

The Uchidas have to leave for Utah but are able to take many of their items. Much of the camp watches them and five hundred other internees depart. The camp has been their community for five months and they do not want to uproot again. On the way to Utah they see many things they have not seen for awhile, like houses, stores, dogs and white children. The train ride is uncomfortable, but the food is good. They are also permitted periodic callisthenic breaks. When they arrive in Salt Lake City, Yoshiko runs into her friend, Helen, another Nisei and they quickly exchange information.

The next day they receive information on the new camp from The Topaz Times. The area has no vegetation, only dry greasewood. Topaz is in the middle of the desert, a camp with rows of simple barracks in a totally unacceptable area. The internees have to enter the camp with strict military guards. Upon entering, they endure another medical exam and are assigned living quarters, this time in Apartment C of Barrack 2, Block 7. The camp is a mile square with 8000 residents, making it the fifth largest city in Utah. However, the city is extremely new and has been thrown together in haste. Their instructions inform them how to handle the new buildings.

The food is decent but most things are in short supply. The temperature is extremely low. The first evening they meet Charles F. Ernst, their project director. Papa spends his first morning in Topaz trying to alleviate the most pressing needs in the camp. The internees that come in future days are placed in areas increasingly unable to accommodate them, sometimes with gaping holes in the roofs. Committees are quickly organized to handle complaints but weeks pass before satisfactory results come. Dust storms come later, which are incredibly destructive. Yoshiko recounts the first one she experiences. Living at Topaz requires many physical adjustments and colds and illness are a constant presence. Access to water is erratic, so it is hard to stay clean and do laundry. Electricity is also often in short supply.

Eventually the government starts turning over various barracks to be run by the prisoners themselves, such as the Canteen, which is to be run as a Consumers' Cooperative. Uchida's father serves as chairman of its Board of Directors. The camp will eventually have a barber shop, radio repair shop, a dry goods store and two movie houses.

Yoshiko and Keiko again participate in educating the camp's children. They are not forced to "Americanize" the Nisei and they are to teach a syllabus prepared by a Stanford Summer Session class. The head of the Education Section, Dr. John C. Carlisle, addresses them. They have various white bosses who live in the Administration building. Yoshiko is assigned to register children and teach Second Grade. The school buildings are in terrible condition and the weather is not accommodating but the Nisei children are eager to learn; they learn even despite dangerous dust storms.

Chapter 8, Topaz, Winter's Despair

Chapter 8, Topaz, Winter's Despair Summary and Analysis

Towards the end of October, snow begins to approach the camp. Sheetrock crews finally come to the camp but move slowly. The Uchida family now has walls and a ceiling backed by sheetrock along with a stove to warm them. Friends continue to stop by in Topaz as they had in Tanforan, and this cheers them up. The Uchidas adjust well to their cramped living quarters, but other families have great difficulties. Their white friends are kind to them, but the white "friends" of other Japanese Americans loot their belongings and lie to them.

Weather brings schooling to a halt in mid-November and the kids are sad because school gave them something to do. The children eventually acquire a sense of purpose for what they are there to do.

The camp's first Thanksgiving is relatively happy; some of the camp members are able to plant some saplings to have flowers to look forward to in the spring but the climate ultimately kills the plants. In November many of the residents have their property shipped out to them, and so many residents can wear their clothing. At Thanksgiving they dress up and decorate the mess hall. The mess crew makes them a decent meal.

In December, when stoves and walls are installed, the schools are able to reopen for all-day sessions. Life settles down to stable routines. Larger and larger groups of visitors come to see conditions in the camp, one of whom is director of the International House at the University of California in Berkeley. He tells them of the difficulties of the war in Berkeley and the Nisei are frustrated by their inability to help their country. A British MP visits at one point, as does the Governor of Utah and his wife.

Representatives for the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council come to offer students interested in leaving camp the opportunity to further their education. Before Yoshiko had resisted leaving her family, but now she is ready to escape. But obtaining leave clearance is long and tedious. The War Relocation Authority has a policy of encouraging early depopulation and qualified citizens can leave as early as July 1942.

Prisoners can leave if they had a place to go, can support themselves, intelligence records showed they are not dangerous, their presence in an area will cause no public disturbance and the applicant agrees to inform the War Relocation Authority of his/her address. Students are among the first allowed to leave, and three thousand go to colleges all over the country.

Christmas comes, and the days are short, and close to zero degrees. They decorate small greasewood trees and hold an Open House for parents. Residents do the best

they can to re-create more gracious moments in their old lives. On Christmas, gifts come from all over the United States to Topaz. The prisoners are touched by how much concern many of those in the rest of the country have for them.

At the end of the year, Keiko and Yoshiko continue to try to leave Topaz. Those who stay in camp try to make life pleasant and productive. Yoshiko tries to be a good teacher and community member. She reads, listens to the radio and hears lectures. She socializes with friends and sees an occasional movie. But she is still in an artificial community isolated from the world. Keiko and Yoshiko sometimes are allowed to travel outside of camp to buy supplies and enjoys it. The Uchidas are even granted permission to see Papa's mother in Montana. It refreshes and uplifts Yoshiko's parents.

The residents of Topaz become increasingly frustrated and begin to take it out on each other. Criminals are already there but the nature of life in camp brings the worst out of people. Shoplifting is common and some are attacked, and Papa is harassed by those who think the Coop is not run properly. Issei and Nisei will often have to negotiate to resolve differences between camp factions. Their initiative is sapped, dignity and freedom instincts diminish and create doubts and tensions. Yoshiko feels this same desperation, which is growing particularly in hospitals and around sickness.

In January 1943, the Secretary of War enters the Nisei into the draft. The Army event wants an all-Nisei combat team. The same month, President Roosevelt frees the Japanese for combat and to contribute to the war effort. The Nisei hate the idea of a segregated unit; they want to serve as other Americans. The Issei criticize the Nisei for being willing to fight for a country that has betrayed them.

Army recruiters cause great turmoil in the camp. Many of the recruitment questions are also unacceptably insulting, though some Nisei men join up to prove their loyalty to the United States. It turns out that the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Infantry Battalion, composed of Japanese Americans from Hawaii as well as the continental United States, today shows the bravery of the Nisei men.

Spring comes slowly, which leaves things cold for a long time. Most of the plants the internees planted have died, but the internees in Topaz continue to try to improve the camp and Papa, despite being older, leads the way. Sometimes the men are able to leave camp, but one day one of the men (a sixty-three year old) is shot by a military policeman. The MP's excuse is implausible and the death causes uproar that lasts for over a week. Spring continues to heighten the camp's unrest. One night a horde of pro-Japan agitators attacks the art school and another some of the pro-Japan thugs demand that Papa stop being so obsequious to their white captors. The violence convinces all of the Uchida's to try to leave.

In early May, Keiko is offered a position as assistant in a nursery school run by Mt. Holyoke College. Soon thereafter, Yoshiko is offered a full graduate fellowship at Smith college. Yoshiko's approval papers come on the 24th of May. As Yoshiko leaves the camp, she reflects on how much the Issei gave up for their Nisei children and how much they suffered. Yoshiko and Keiko have deep thoughts of gratitude for their parents.

Soon thereafter, Papa and Mama are released as well because they are under threat from pro-Japan thugs. However, before this, they give Keiko and Yoshiko a big send-off with many of their friends.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

The Japanese internment has been judged by history as one of the United States' government's most shameful acts, a flagrant violation of democratic liberty and the American Constitution. In 1976, Gerald Ford makes a proclamation apologizing for the evacuation. The Japanese American Citizens League pushes for redress so hard that, despite many Issei having died, they are able to secure reparation.

The Nisei are approaching retirement as this book is being written. Others often ask why they did not fight for their civil liberties. Yoshiko explains that there was no "ethnic" consciousness at the time, no freedom marches, no Martin Luther King, Jr. Americans refused to recognize that Japanese-Americans' rights were being violated. Today, Yoshiko would never allow the same thing to happen again.

Yoshiko continues to be proud of her country despite its errors, and she admires many of the Issei for bearing their mistreatment with such stoic composure. She believes her parents made the best of a bad situation. Yoshiko thinks she survived incarceration because her Issei parents taught her how to endure.

After release, the Nisei spread across the United States. Some Americans accept them with warmth, but others with hatred. When Yoshiko leaves Topaz, she works hard to prove that she is a loyal American. The brilliant record of the highly decorated Nisei combat teams help alleviate much hatred.

The Issei's productive years quickly came to an end and the Nisei have to care for them. Yoshiko's parents come to live with their children when they are released from Topaz and then the Uchidas move to New York City. Yoshiko's parents find their New York apartment depressing because it is so enclosed and Papa has lost nearly all of his retirement benefits because his company has gone defunct. In May 1949, he files for damages with the United States government. They are given some compensation though what is paid out to the Japanese Americans nowhere near covers their losses.

By 1951, Yoshiko's parents are able to buy their own house. Keiko stays with them until she marries a mathematics professor from Yale. Yoshiko spends two years in Japan and comes in contact with her Japanese relatives. She learns much about Japanese culture. While she goes mostly as a writer, she becomes immersed in Japanese arts and crafts. Her trip to Japan helps her reconnect with her values and traditions.

Yoshiko's parents continue to attend church together and try to organize support for Doshisha University's Department of Theology. Her mother dies in 1967 and Papa endures her death with strength. Yoshiko's parents do not fear death, but accept it.

Many scholars have well documented the wartime evacuation of the Japanese Americans. Yoshiko instead tells a personal story, focusing on the Issei-Nisei

relationship. Her family is not typical of Japanese immigrant families; others suffer much more. However, many young Americans have never heard of how the Japanese were treated and Yoshiko hopes that by sharing her experiences she can help stop such a terrible thing from happening again.

Yoshiko today writes books for young people and speaks at schools about her experience as a Japanese American. She wants the children to see her not as an alien Asian, but as a human being. She tries to teach them their connection to other humans. She tells children about how the Issei persevered and how their own country imprisoned them and took their assets. The story needs to be told.

Characters

Yoshiko Uchida

Yoshiko Uchida is Desert Exile's author and main character, along with her family members. Yoshiko's parents, Dwight and Iku, are both Issei, first-generation Japanese immigrants to the United States. As a result of the fact that both of her parents are well-educated, competent and organized, Yoshiko grows up in a secure and stable home and remembers having a happy childhood. However, early on she faces the challenge of being Nisei, a second-generation Japanese-American. The Nisei often do not know Japanese and feel disconnected from Japan. Yet they are also not accepted by the majority white United States because they are socially, economically and ethnically distinct. This creates stress and alienation for Yoshiko.

Yoshiko does not handle her family's internment well. She hates the poor accommodations and feels utterly betrayed by a country that she thought at least respected her rights as a United States citizen. The conditions she endures are terrible and they often put her in dark spirits. Her writings concerning internment at Tanforan and Topaz, however, display an inner strength and desire to persevere. Yoshiko stays busy, teaching primary school, socializing with friends and struggling to continue her education.

Yoshiko is ultimately permitted to leave the internment camp to pursue her education. When she grows up, she writes a number of books about her experience as a Japanese American, including Desert Exile, which tells the story of her internment. She openly admits that better and more detailed accounts of Japanese internment have been written, but adds her story to give just one more reason to stop something like that from every happening again.

Dwight Uchida

Dwight Takashi Uchida moves to California in 1906 at twenty-two, having taught Japanese in Hawaii previously. He initially hopes to become a doctor, but goes to live in Seattle with his mother and along the way finds work at a merchandise store owned by a successful Japanese entrepreneur. As time goes on, Dwight moves up the ladder and eventually has enough money to bring the rest of his family over from Japan.

In 1917, Dwight is invited to manage the San Francisco branch of Mitsui and Company, which moves him to San Francisco. That same year he marries Iku Umegaki, and while they have never met before marrying, they have a strong marriage their whole lives. Both are Christians and quickly develop a life that is a mixture of traditional Japanese and American. Keiko and Yoshiko grow up in a stable and secure home as a result.

Dwight is a strong leader and an excellent financial manager. He is also exceedingly generous and constantly upbeat, energetic and cheerful. Everything he does, he does

quickly. Even when he is taken away by the FBI in 1941, he constantly sends home letters to keep up his family's spirits, despite the fact that it is he who is imprisoned. When Dwight joins his family at Tanforan, he is among the camp leaders to establish the camp's social institutions, serving on a number of leadership committees. Since he is friendly with the American administrative staff at Topaz, he is later threatened by pro-Japan camp members.

Keiko Uchida

Yoshiko's older sister who is a constant presence but relatively undeveloped character in Desert Exile. She is also eager to pursue her education and faces the same challenges being Nisei. She reacts similarly to internment as well.

Iku Uchida

Yoshiko's mother. Like Dwight, she is an Issei and a Christian and comes to the United States to be married. She possesses many traits of a traditional Japanese wife, being reserved, able to stoically endure suffering and so on, but also has a soft, kind temperament and a deep love of nature. She tends to her daughters' education and takes good care of her home and community. She is distraught when the FBI takes Dwight away and does not take well having to abandon her home and survive internment.

Oakland Congregational Church

The Uchidas are a serious Christian family who are constant participants in their local Japanese-American Christian Church, the Oakland Congregational Church. The Church is often a staple source of friends and community and helps the Uchidas handle being evacuated.

The Issei

First-generation Japanese-American immigrants to the United States. They sacrifice greatly for their children and are refused United States citizenship until 1952. Dwight and Iku are Issei.

The Nisei

Second-generation Japanese-Americans, who have Issei parents. The Nisei have no complete social and national identity, being ethnically Japanese but culturally and often linguistically American. Yoshiko and Keiko are Nisei.

The United States' Government

The United States government interns thousands of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II under the suspicion that they are spies for Japan. The government releases all of the internees and much later issues (largely inadequate) compensation for lost assets.

White American Children

Yoshiko and Keiko feel constantly alienated from their young white American classmates, despite wanting and trying desperately to fit in.

The US Army and the FBI

The United States Army and the FBI are responsible for rounding up and managing the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Japanese American Organizations

A number of Japanese-American organizations, like the Japanese American Citizens League, are a great help to the Uchidas and other Japanese-American families throughout the internment period.

Non-Japanese Friends and Colleagues

The Uchidas have many non-Japanese friends and colleagues that are a constant presence and help during internment. They send letters and make constant visits, along with sending gifts.

Objects/Places

The United States of America

The setting of Desert Exile, the United States of America was a comfortable and welcoming environment for the Uchidas up until World War II when its government inters them for much of the war.

San Francisco, California

The Uchidas live in San Francisco until they are evacuated.

The House above Grove Street

Yoshiko's name for the Uchida family home.

Oakland Congregational Church

The Japanese-American Church that the Uchidas attend.

UC-Berkeley

The San Francisco based university where Yoshiko attends school.

Tanforan

The first internment camp that the Uchidas are placed in, located in California. In Tanforan, Japanese-Americans organize a number of social institutions, often led by Dwight Uchida.

Topaz

Located in the Utah desert, Topaz is the second and more permanent internment camp the Uchidas are placed in. The weather in Topaz is harsh, often very cold, and the location is entirely lacks vegetation. While Japanese-Americans struggle to have good attitudes, eventually their internment starts to significantly negatively affect their psychology.

The Uchidas' Assets

The Uchidas are a fairly well-to-do family among Japanese-American immigrants. When they have to leave their assets behind, the Uchidas, Iku in particular, are devastated. The United States government deprives Japanese-Americans of huge amounts of assets and never fully compensates them.

Japanese Art and Crafts

Iku Uchida is a collector of traditional Japanese arts and crafts; as such, Yoshiko grows up with them and is sad when they have to leave them behind.

The Bible

The Uchidas are Christians and members of the Japanese-American Oakland Congregational Church.

The Uchidas' Camp Belongings

The Uchidas are permitted to bring some of their belongings to Tanforan and Topaz, belongings which help them to hold ties to their lives when they were free.

The Uchidas' Horse Stall

In Tanforan, the Uchidas are literally interned in a horse stall in a large stable.

The Tanforan-Topaz Barracks

The Barracks at both internment camps are dirty and hastily built. This leaves the Uchidas exposed to the elements on numerous occasions and makes it difficult to have schools in session during bad weather.

The Tanforan-Topaz Social Institutions

The Japanese-American internees are effectively community members and as such organize a large number of social institutions while they are interned. They form schools, shops, churches, assembly centers and even movie theatres.

Education

The Uchidas are big believers in education and Keiko and Yoshiko spend much of the book either in school or teaching primary school and running nurseries.

Themes

Issei and Nisei

"Issei" is the name of first-generation Japanese-American immigrants. Typically Issei immigrated to the United States in the early part of the 20th century. Often poor, these immigrants, like so many others, struggled to make a life for themselves in a country that was often suspicious of them. They faced a wide range of trials, but through hard work and thrift, many became quite prosperous. Dwight and Iku Uchida were among the more prosperous Issei. Many of the Issei remained deeply connected to Japan, not only through relatives but culturally.

"Nisei" is the name for the children of the Issei. The Nisei typically identified primarily as Americans and often knew little Japanese. In any event, they considered their primary culture as American and their primary language as English. Since they were born in the United States, all Nisei were American citizens. Despite feeling most at home in the United States, the Japanese appearance of the Nisei led most white Americans to keep their distance. Some were accepted, but others were hesitant to associate with them. However, the Nisei were desperate to be accepted. Yoshiko and Keiko Uchida were Nisei who struggled to fit in for most of their adolescence.

The relationship between the Issei and the Nisei was complex. The Issei sacrificed enormously for the Nisei, giving them every opportunity they could. Yet they also raised them to be grateful, obedient and respectful. Consequently, the Nisei felt a profound gratitude towards their parents and tended to obey them in all things. However, the Nisei also felt alienated from the traditional Japanese folkways of their parents, and developed a different culture and different interests. As a result, tensions between the Issei and Nisei developed in the concentration camps, particularly because they often had divided loyalties. Yoshiko discusses the relationship between the Issei and the Nisei throughout the book.

Injustice

Desert Exile is the story of how the Uchida family endured the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Since internment is near universally regarded as a great injustice, injustice is a major theme of Desert Exile. In fact, even the title "Desert Exile," suggests terrible treatment by a society that one was once a member of.

While being interned by one's own country is clearly unjust, Yoshiko's reasons for conceiving of internment as unjust are more specific. The Issei had come to the United States to build a new life. They appreciated the United States' democratic institutions, even though they could not vote and they were grateful for the freedom to live their lives as they saw fit. The Nisei considered the United States their home and thought of themselves first and foremost as Americans. They were, after all, United States citizens.

Thus, when internment came about, Yoshiko found herself with three complaints of injustice against the United States government. First, the Issei were mistreated simply because of their genetics and their loyalty to the United States. However the Nisei were doubly wronged. They were American citizens and had no other national identity than as Americans. Thus, they not only were treated wrongly simply because they were genetically Japanese and loyal to the United States, but because they had constitutional protections due to them as citizens that were ignored.

Alienation and Integration

Chapter 2, "On Being Japanese and American," elucidates an important theme of Desert Exile that runs throughout the book. While one might not expect a book about Japanese internment during World War II to concern matters like how included or excluded Japanese Americans felt from American life prior to World War II, Yoshiko connects them intimately.

Since Yoshiko was Nisei, she grew up without a national identity that she was wholly comfortable with. On the one hand, her parents were Japanese, and she was ethnically Japanese. On the other hand, English was her primarily language and the United States was the only country she had ever known as home. Yet white American rejected her, making it difficult for Yoshiko to feel at home. She struggled desperately to seem as American as possible, repudiating traditional Japanese forms of life and culture in favor of American ones and doing her best to prove her loyalty to American institutions.

When internment came, Yoshiko's sense of alienation from others was made explicit when the institutions of her society locked her away, presuming her to be a traitor without just cause. She despised her living conditions and the way that her people were treated, and she did not hate them just because they were poor living conditions and her freedom had been taken away, but because she was being wholly alienated and segregated from the people she most desperately wanted to accept her.

Style

Perspective

Desert Exile was written by Yoshiko Uchida, a second-generation (Nisei) Japanese American who was born in the United States. Yoshiko's parents, Dwight and Iku Uchida, were Issei or first-generation Japanese-American immigrants. Yoshiko and her sister Keiko grew up in a loving upper middle-class Japanese-American home. Their lives were full of activities, including church, school, social events and community get-togethers. Both children had excellent educations but grew up feeling alienated from their classmates and fellow Americans.

Yoshiko's perspective, therefore, is a mixture of the Japanese and the American. While considering herself American, Yoshiko always had to face the fact that Americans viewed her differently despite her best efforts to fit in with them. She hardly spoke Japanese and spoke flawless English, but she had to remain in her Nisei social enclave to have close friends and feel accepted. Thus, Yoshiko's perspective is also that of one who is somewhat alienated from a society she wishes to be a part of.

This sense of alienation is only exacerbated by Yoshiko's experience in the Japanese-American internment camps during World War II. The country she had strived so hard to be a part of had rejected her and imprisoned her as a suspected traitor. Yet Yoshiko never gave up her loyalty to the United States and its institutions. Rather, her perspective is always that of one who admires the United States but is embarrassed by its errors and aims to ensure that they never happen again.

Tone

For its subject matter, Desert Exile's tone is relatively subdued. Desert Exile is the tale of an upper middle-class Japanese American family who were "evacuated" by the United States government, their government, because of their race. During World War II, Japanese Americans were placed in concentration camps because it was believed that they might be spies for the Axis Powers. Yoshiko constantly emphasizes the deep loyalty her family, the Uchidas, felt towards the United States. As Nisei, Keiko and Yoshiko tried to become as American as they possibly could. Given that Yoshiko had spent most of her life attempting to become American, her sense of betrayal at being imprisoned must have been profound.

However, while Yoshiko often explicitly communicates that she felt bitter and resentful and demeaned, the tone of the text does not reflect this. While her childhood is described in a somewhat idyllic fashion, it is communicated in a subdued fashion as well. This is not to say that the text is emotionless; rather, it is muffled or dampened more than one would expect for such a trying period of time.

We hear Yoshiko's youth described as healthy, full of community activities and consisting in a mixture of the Japanese and the American and yet little strong language is used. The same goes for Yoshiko's descriptions of the concentration camp. The subdued tone continues even into the epilogue, where Yoshiko describes the remainder of her family's life and her activities educating American students about Japanese internment.

Structure

Desert Exile is a fairly simple book with a fairly simple structure. It is under two hundred pages and covers a small period of time, briefly sketching Yoshiko's family history and youth, but focusing primarily on the years 1941, 1942 and 1943, through the beginning and end of the internment process. The book is composed of eight brief chapters and contains a number of pictures with explanations that personalize the book, along with an epilogue.

Chapter 1, The House above Grove Street, explains Yoshiko's family history. It first introduces the Uchida home and then flashes backward in time to explain how Yoshiko's parents, Dwight and Iku Uchida, came to the United States and became married, setting up a home and having their two children, Keiko and Yoshiko. Yoshiko also explains her childhood, which was secure, happy and full of excellent opportunities. Despite feeling rejected by American society, Yoshiko was relatively happy.

Chapter 2, On Being Japanese and American, expands on the character of the Issei and Nisei and the struggle that the Nisei went through being Japanese and American at the same time. Yoshiko spends a lot of time here describing how American she felt but how un-American she appeared to white American citizens. The reader gets a sense for her alienation from American society in this chapter. Chapter 3, Pearl Harbor, is brief, explaining how the Uchidas initially reacted to Pearl Harbor and how the United States government reacted to Japanese Americans. Chapter 4 discusses the process of evacuation to the concentration camps, revealing how much anguish the Uchida women felt at having to leave their community, home, belongings and assets behind.

Chapters 5 and 6 cover the Uchidas' time in the Tanforan Assembly Center, the first concentration camp where the Uchidas were imprisoned. Chapters 7 and 8 discusses the Uchidas' time in Topaz, the Utah concentration camp where they spent most of the time they were imprisoned. The book ends with an epilogue which explains how the Uchida family history continued from the end of Chapter 8 until just before the book was published. It also explains that Yoshiko speaks around the country about Japanese internment and often writes about it to help preserve the rights of American citizens.

Quotes

"I believe those early Issei (first generation Japanese immigrant) women must have had tremendous reserves of strength and courage to do what they did.... Theirs was a determination and endurance born ... of an uncommon spirit." (Chapter 1, 6)

"Their marriage was an arranged one, as was the custom of their day. But I have always thought the professors who planned the match must surely have taken great pride in the glorious success of their endeavor." (Chapter 1, 24)

"Our parents' Japaneseness is still very much a part of us." (Chapter 2, 31)

"Their [Yoshiko's parents] lives also reflected a blend of Buddhist philosophy dominated by Christian faith. So it was that we grew up with a strong dose of the Protestant ethic coupled with a feeling of respect for our teachers and superiors; a high regard for such qualities as frugality, hard work, patience, diligence, courtesy, and loyalty; and a sense of responsibility and love, not only for our parents and family, but for our fellow man." (Chapter 2, 36)

"We were neither totally American nor totally Japanese, but a unique fusion of the two. ... Small wonder that many of us felt insecure and ambivalent and retreated into our own special subculture where we were fully accepted." (Chapter 2, 45)

"The Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor." (Chapter 3, 46)

"'If you had a gun in your hands, at whom would you shoot, the Americans or the Japanese?' In reply to the second question, most answered they would have to shoot straight up." (Chapter 3, 51)

"I'm for catching every Japanese in American, Alaska and Hawaii now and putting them in concentration camps ... Damn them! Let's get rid of them now!" (Chapter 4, 54)

"From that day on we became Family Number 13453." (Chapter 4, 59)

"We were in the Tanforan Assembly Center now and there was no turning back." (Chapter 4, 68)

"Each stall was now numbered and ours was number 40." (Chapter 5, 70)

"Papa!" (Chapter 5, 79)

"The members of this committee realized that the deprivation of the rights of one minority undermined the rights of the majority as well, and set a dangerous precedent for the future." (Chapter 6, 85)

"As soon as we entered Tanforan, the need for certain institutions to serve the community of 8000 people was immediately apparent." (Chapter 6, 86)

"Welcome to Topaz—Your Camp." (Chapter 7, 106)

"Uchida San, I'm old and I may die before the war ends. I don't want to die and be buried in a place like this." (Chapter 8, 123)

"In many cases correspondences and friendships developed that lasted long after the war ended, and we were touched by the compassion and concern some Americans felt for us." (Chapter 8, 129)

"No matter what I did, I was still in an artificial government-spawned community on the periphery of the real world. I was in a dismal, dreary camp surrounded by barbed wire in the middle of a stark, harsh landscape that offered nothing to refresh the eye or heal the spirit." (Chapter 8, 130)

"It's too bad you Nisei have no country to take your grievances to, Yoshiko San, since it's your own country that's put you behind barbed wire." (Chapter 8, 134)

"Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry." (Chapter 8, 135)

"For my sister and me, the cold dark winter had come to an end, and now at last we were within reach of spring. Our long desert exile was over. We were on our way back, at last, to the world we had left over a year ago." (Chapter 8, 144)

"... not only was that evacuation wrong, but Japanese Americans were and are loyal Americans ... we have learned from the tragedy of that long-ago experience forever to treasure liberty and justice for each individual American, and resolve that this kind of action shall never again be repeated." (Epilogue, 146)

"I tell them of my pride in being a Japanese American today, but I also tell them I celebrate our common humanity, for I feel we must never lose our sense of connection with the human race." (Epilogue, 154)

"I wrote [the book] as well for all Americans, with the hope that through knowledge of the past, they will never allow another group of people in America to be sent into a desert exile ever again." (Epilogue, 154)

Topics for Discussion

Who were the Issei? What was unique about their American experience?

Who were the Nisei? What was unique about their American experience?

Why did the wartime evacuation of the Japanese Americans occur? What was the justification given?

Name three distinctive facts that Yoshiko Uchida explains about the relationship between the Issei and the Nisei.

How did Yoshiko respond to feeling alienated from American culture before the war?

How did Yoshiko respond to feeling alienated from American culture after the war?

What does the attempt by the Japanese Americans to build community wherever they go tell you about the nature of humanity?