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From Internment, to Korea, to Solitude

Robert M. Wada
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American history, like that of every other nation in the world, is marred by ugly episodes. On that dishonorable list, slavery and the persecution of Native Americans are followed closely by the internment of Japanese-Americans who were dragooned from their homes and exiled to War Relocation Centers shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Robert M. Wada, a first-generation citizen, spent three years of his youth in Poston, an internment camp located near Parker, Arizona. Wada, a native of Redlands, California, was the youngest child of an immigrant couple from Hiroshima. The Wada family, like most immigrants of that era, were industrious and focused on making a better life in America. In Redlands, however, they lived within the literal and figurative fences of racial segregation. This prejudice continued even after Wada returned from service as a U.S. Marine in the Korean War. He writes:

When I first returned to the States, I felt confident, proud and thought I had conquered the obstacle of looking like the enemy. But what a surprise and rude awakening I had when I went looking for an apartment for us in 1953…A lady opened the door and looked at me. “Sorry,” she said, “it’s not my rule, but the owner won’t let me rent the apartment to you.”

While the rest of the family was interned, two of the author’s older brothers volunteered to serve in Europe with the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Both were wounded. Two other brothers were also in the military, and so when the Korean War broke out, Robert was quick to join the U.S. Marine Corps. He persuaded his childhood friend, Robert B. Madrid, to volunteer as well.

Madrid was killed in action, and this guilt-inspiring loss has been a driving force in much of Wada’s life. After receiving information from another Marine present when the fatal mortar round landed, Wada writes, “My serenity after fifty years is in knowing Bob did not die alone like so many others on the side of some barren hill, no one within reach or even within the sound of their voice…”

Wada’s reminiscences about his family’s World War II internment are relatively benign in comparison. In his opinion, the Japanese-Americans did more than make the best of an ugly situation. There were gardens, schools, and public services in the camps, all arranged by the residents. From his account, most accepted their lot with equanimity.

While the author’s story is powerful, this is not a perfect book. The narration is sometimes disjointed. Wada alludes to his second wife with respect and gratitude, but he notes without elaboration that their divorce caused hard feelings within the family. In that context, readers may infer what they will from Wada’s admission that he was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder late in his life. It must also be noted that the latter part of the book is not so much analytical and historically important as it is a sketch of the author’s successful professional life.

Nevertheless, this is a significant memoir. A hundred years from now, historians will treasure books like From Internment, to Korea, to Solitude.

GARY PRESLEY (May 18, 2010)

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