

Setsuko's Secret: Heart Mountain and the Legacy of the Japanese American Incarceration

Shirley Ann Higuchi

University of Wisconsin Press (Sep 15, 2020)

Hardcover \$29.95 (336pp)

978-0-299-32780-4

Setsuko's Secret is an intense, personal chronicle of the unconscionable internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Soon after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt authorized Executive Order 9066, calling for the relocation of certain "enemy" populations to military camps. Rounded up and stripped of their civil rights, homes, livelihoods, and businesses, some 120,000 Japanese Americans were shuttled to bleak, substandard settlements, isolated in remote US regions and patrolled by armed guards.

Though Shirley Ann Higuchi's parents met as children at Wyoming's Heart Mountain War Relocation Center, she did not know the full extent of their internment until her mother, Setsuko, passed away in 2005. When questioned, Setsuko often downplayed her imprisonment experiences, insisting that it had been "fun," and that she was "happy."

Throughout her life, however, Setsuko had maintained a secret relationship with other Heart Mountain incarcerated, and as her final legacy, she hoped to establish an interpretive museum on the site. Determined to honor her mother's wishes, Higuchi became involved with the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation.

Setsuko's Secret details Shirley Ann Higuchi's Heart Mountain work. It balances a complex cultural history with the individual perspectives of Japanese American families. Higuchi shows that the resilience and sense of community that developed in the camps was remarkable, despite harsh extremes in climate and a demeaning lack of privacy and resources.

The aftereffects of internment are explored, with some detainees striving to become "perfect" Americans through economic and social successes. Others channeled their outrage into activism, and many experienced continuing mistrust toward the country that had treated them like criminals.

Setsuko Higuchi may have kept her internment memories private, but her unique spirit inspired the founding of the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center and this extraordinary testament to a sorrowful episode in American history.

MEG NOLA (September / October 2020)

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