

from Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans



ABOUT THE READING John Y. Tateishi, the writer of this memoir, was only a young boy when he and his family were imprisoned at the Manzanar War Relocation Center in California.



As you read note the conditions under which the imprisoned Americans lived, and think about how the events described affected the writer.

My lessons in life came early. I'm talking here not about the rules that help you to survive and get you through the day, but about the *real* lessons, the ones that really count, that shape our lives and account for what we become. Survival, yes, but only in its most profound sense. For me, it was the winter of 1942, the December of that year when the cold and cutting winds swept across the valley, just eight months after our imprisonment and one year after Pearl Harbor. I was three and a half years old then, when my father, who refused to accept the imprisonment quietly, was arrested by the soldiers and taken from the camp. . . I watched as they took them [the writer's father and some other men] away, handcuffed and **shackled**.

Source: *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, edited by Erica Harth. Reproduced by permission of PALGRAVE, an imprint of St. Martin's Press L.L.C.

VOCABULARY

profound deep;
fundamental

shackled with irons on
their feet

brandishing waving
threateningly

The writer says that the events he is about to describe taught him something very important about life.

That night was terrifying. All night long, the searchlights swept the camp, and bands of men could be heard running past our barracks, shouting angrily. We had no idea what had happened to my father, and at one point in the night I sneaked out to try to find him. I can recall running from building to building, avoiding the searchlights and the bands of men and, most fearfully, hiding from the soldiers as they swept through the camp. At one point during the night, while the riot was still raging throughout the camp, a group of men **brandishing** sticks stood near the front gate, angrily shouting at the guards. At some point, the guards opened fire on the crowd. I didn't know I had heard gunfire but recall seeing the crowd of men running and shouting in all directions in what seemed a mass of confusion. I was terrified. I turned and ran all the way back to our barracks and, once inside, said nothing to my mother or my grandfather or my brothers. I was sure the guards were going to come and get us. I don't recall when I eventually fell asleep, but I remember being awakened throughout the night by the angry shouts of men stampeding past our barracks.

The rioters were prisoners who protested their internment.

As it turned out, it was a night of violence that ended up not only with the guards firing at the crowds of rioters, but with attacks against men accused of being snitches who cooperated with the administrators to single out the men they wanted arrested and taken from the camp. . .

Not all the violent acts of that night were carried out by the guards. Some prisoners attacked other prisoners whom they thought had cooperated with the guards.

After my father had been taken away, I remember telling my mother that they were going to shoot him, because it seemed to me that was what they did with those guns when they took you away from the camp, forced you away from the safety of your family and your friends, took you beyond the barbed wire into that fearsome distance. Nothing my mother told me could convince me otherwise, especially as the days and weeks passed without his return. I never mentioned my fear again to anyone,

Last Witnesses, *continued*

Primary Source

not even to my brothers. I kept my fear buried within me, lived with it day and night because it was too frightening to mention or even to think about. It was our first Christmas in camp, the first Christmas my brothers and I had spent without my father. We wouldn't see him again for over a year.

Prisoners were often kept in internment camps for years.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Based on the excerpt, what was difficult about being in Manzanar during the war?

2. How do you think these events shaped the writer?
