

They Call Me Moses Masaoka

By Mike Masaoka
with Bill Hosokawa
Published by William Morrow & Co.
1987, New York
383 pages; \$18.95

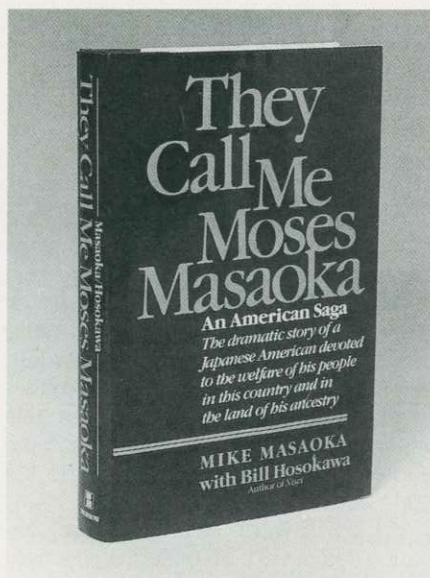
This is the autobiography of a nisei—a second-generation Japanese-American. More importantly, it is the autobiography of a man who has toiled tirelessly as a lobbyist in the cause of better relations between Japan and the United States. By extension, it is a history of the persecution suffered by Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans in the United States before, during and after World War II and the story of their struggle for equal rights as Americans.

Masaoka has been to the Japanese-Americans as Moses was to the Jews, leading his people through a long and bitter journey rife with sorrow and hardships, and it was the pervasive prejudice against his parents and other Japanese immigrants that inspired him in his battle for social and political equality.

Although he had done well in school and was a leading member of his high school and college debate teams, it was not until his college debate coach, C. Laverne Bane at the University of Utah, suggested he prepare a speech on Japanese-American identity and the prejudice that Japanese-Americans faced that Masaoka realized what he had to do with his life.

The most stirring parts of the book are the author's vivid account of the unjust relocation and internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor and his description of the valiant regiment of Japanese-American volunteers—from inception to wartime exploits in the European theater.

The uprooting and internment of Japanese-Americans was carried out under Executive Order 9066. Masaoka, a leading figure in the Japanese-American Citizens League (JACL) since before the war, represented the JACL in appeals to the



U.S. government that argued that such oppressive treatment was a gross violation of the Bill of Rights. The author sees such treatment as having resulted from racial prejudice, wartime hysteria and a failure of political leadership.

Masaoka singles out three people as especially guilty of fanning the flames of wartime hysteria. One is Earl Warren, then California's attorney general and later to become Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, who did more than any other person to stir up fears of subversive activity by Japanese. Another is the journalist Walter Lippmann, who wrote two influential columns arguing, on the basis of incomplete research, that it was necessary to move the Japanese away from the West Coast for national security reasons. The third culprit Masaoka points to is Lt. Gen. John DeWitt, commander of the army's Western Defense Command, who saw the war in the Pacific as a race war and who testified before Congress that, "A Jap's a Jap. They are a dangerous element... There is no way to determine their loyalty."

Their loyalty should never have been in doubt. At the 1940 JACL Convention, Masaoka wrote the Japanese-American Creed, reading, in part, "I believe in America... I pledge... to uphold her Constitution; to obey her laws; to respect her flag; to defend her against all enemies, foreign

or domestic; to actively assume my duties and obligations as a citizen, cheerfully and without reservations whatsoever..."

Masaoka was also one of the main forces behind the idea of forming a regiment of Japanese-Americans to fight in the army as a way to prove their loyalty to the United States. Conceived to rebut the rationale behind the relocation camps, the all-nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team fought gallantly in France and Italy.

For its size and length of service, the 442nd is the most decorated unit in U.S. military history—truly a "Go for Broke" regiment. Of the five Masaoka boys who volunteered for the 442nd, one was killed in action, another came back with a 100% disability, and one was left with a permanent limp. Masaoka was an NCO in charge of public relations and was assigned to publicize the bravery of Japanese-Americans.

The book also tells of the opposition that the idea of an all-nisei volunteer unit provoked among powerful groups in California, the Oregon and Idaho state legislatures and elsewhere. Additionally, it goes into Masaoka's efforts leading to the postwar Walter-McCarran Act, which removed race as a consideration in U.S. immigration policy, and describes what went on behind the scenes on the San Francisco Peace Treaty.

Not long after this book was published, then-president Ronald Reagan signed a law authorizing reparations to Japanese-Americans who suffered through the internment camps and proffering a formal apology for the injustices wrought during wartime. Although Mike Masaoka and the JACL have finally won that long battle, his fight for justice and for better Japan-U.S. relations goes on. This book was published at an appropriate time—1987, the bicentennial of the drafting of the U.S. Constitution—and raises new and important questions on racial discrimination and prejudice. Although told in the context of Japan-U.S. relations, it forces the reader to face the broad issues of democracy and human rights.

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