

TEACHER'S GUIDE  
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MISSION US: "Prisoner in My Homeland"

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**Poem: "Saga of a People" by Ruth Tanaka**

*Ruth Tanaka was a high school junior at Poston Incarceration Camp in Arizona and won fourth prize for a national contest sponsored by Scholastic Magazine in 1945. This poem was printed in the Poston Chronicle, the prison camp newspaper.*

*They have sprung from a race as old as Time,  
Their backs are bent, their hands are wrinkled and brown,  
For they have toiled long years under a harsh master — Life;  
Each passing year has left its mark  
Upon their seamed and weathered faces  
That show as other faces do,  
A heart-deep yearning for a far-off land;  
A land of frail houses, stunted trees, a sacred volcano  
Sleeping under a blanket of snow.  
Traces of half-forgotten customs  
A love for the life-giving sun, the freshening rain, the deep brown soil,  
Still lingers in their hearts.  
Deep scars of pain and grief are etched on their worn faces  
And yet their wise twinkling eyes  
Have looked on life and found it good.*

*They have come to a fabulous land,  
While still dreaming the long thoughts of youth;  
They have sowed their seeds, weeded furrows,  
Hoed a sun-parched land, watered it and nursed it,  
Harvested their plentiful crops, built a home  
And borne their children.  
Lest they forget the islands of their fathers,  
They have brought their little treasures with them -  
A miniature chest of drawers, lacquered dragon-red;  
Two dainty fans gay with dancing girls;  
A bamboo screen with a tiny arched bridge  
A fragile lilies reflected in still water;  
Little dolls in bright kimonos of hand-painted silk;  
Delicate tea cups get on a polished tray.*

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*The seeds they sowed took root and sprouted;  
Grew tall and straight with bursting pods;  
Giving rich promise of fulfillment.  
So grew their black-haired children  
Straight and tall, drawing nourishment from the free soil  
Of this, their native land.  
Their lives were like a deep, peaceful river  
The old familiar customs of their ancestors  
Mixing with the new bewildering ones of their foster country  
And slowly giving way before them  
Eating a breakfast of crisp bacon and scrambled eggs  
Instead of the hot soup and rice they had eaten  
In the home of their fathers;  
Raising a huge paper carp on Boys' Day;  
Awkwardly tying a silver star to the tip of the family Christmas tree;  
Reluctantly going to a movie with the children,  
Leaving behind a friendly game of Go  
And a cup of steaming, green tea;  
Driving to the beach and learning to roast hot dogs  
Over a driftwood fire,  
And eating them with seed-covered rice cakes;  
Passing on to their children the ceremonious courtesies  
That they had learned so long ago.  
And so they lived out their lives  
Guided by their sons and daughters  
Through this strange new world,  
Slowly changing their deep-rooted ways.*

*They have come to a new home  
Living in a single room  
Behind barbed wire -  
They know that peace has been shattered throughout the world  
By heavily laden bombs of terror and destruction;  
But they who love the deeply tranquil soil  
Are stunned, bewildered by it all,  
By the cold wall which their American friends  
Have built about them.*

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*Now they are standing on the beloved soil of their Western mother,  
Their wizened bodies huddled together  
Against the bitter cold.  
Rising they look toward the sea  
Vainly striving through the mists of the past  
To live again the dreams of their youth,  
Thinking of a pleasant land where cherry blossoms  
Warmed their hearts in spring,  
Where placid goldfish lazily swam in sunny ponds,  
Where all the contented and peaceful;  
They turn towards the red glow of a sinking sun  
Seeing through the distant hills, seeing over all the land  
The rolling hills and valleys of their western mother.  
Then they turn towards each other with eyes full,  
Unshamedly,  
Understandingly;  
For deep in their almond, brown eyes,  
Deep in the innermost depths of their souls (?)  
There shall always glow a hope,  
A hope that peace shall come one day  
A peace forging with understanding and friendship,  
The islands of their long-lost youth  
And the far stretching land of their children's birth.*