



*The Life of Miné Okubo*

Written by Expeditionary Learning for Instructional Purposes

Miné Okubo was born in Riverside, California, on June 27, 1912, the fourth of seven children. Both of her parents were Japanese immigrants, also known as “Issei”

(see box). Her father, who had studied Japanese history, named her after a Japanese creation goddess, Mine (pronounced “mee-neh”). Unfortunately, many people called her “Minnie” because they didn’t know the sacred origin of her name.

As a Nisei child, Miné identified as an American citizen. Her parents, born in Japan, asked her if she wanted to go to a special school to learn how to speak Japanese. She responded, “I don’t need to learn Japanese! I’m an American!” (Curtin).

Living up to her name, Miné was a creative, curious child. Her mother, a calligrapher, helped her develop her skills by giving Miné an art assignment: paint a different cat every day. Later, a teacher at Miné’s high school encouraged her to illustrate for the school newspaper and become art editor of the yearbook.

While studying art at Riverside Community College, Miné thought about applying to the University of California at Berkeley, but she worried that her family would not be able to afford it. She applied anyway, and was awarded a scholarship to attend.

In 1938, after earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Berkeley, Miné received a fellowship to travel to Europe to study art. She bought a used bicycle in France and rode to and from the Louvre, a famous art museum in Paris. (She picked up an important “souvenir” in France, too—the accent mark over the letter “e” in her name, which she added to her signature.) She brought her bike with her across Europe and spent many days happily pedaling around with lunch and art supplies inside the bike’s basket.

Meanwhile, in Germany, a new leader named Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist (Nazi) Party had risen to power. In 1934, Hitler had crowned himself Führer (“supreme leader”) and was spreading his message about the superiority of the “pure,” white German race (which he called “Aryan”). He wanted to spread the Aryan race by conquering other countries—and by “eliminating,” or killing, Jewish people. Hitler called this the “Final Solution” to the Jewish “problem,” but it is now known as the Holocaust. Hitler began secretly building up Germany’s military and signing pacts with other

**Issei** (*EE-say*): Japanese people who had immigrated to the United States but were not U.S. citizens

**Nisei** (*NEE-say*): First-generation Japanese-Americans born in the United States (the children of Issei)

**Sansei** (*SAN-say*): Second-generation Japanese-Americans born in the United States (the children of Nisei)



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countries (including Japan and Italy) to prepare for war. In 1938, as Miné traveled around Europe studying art, Hitler was preparing for war by secretly building up Germany's army.

Miné's European odyssey was cut short when she received a telegram from Riverside in 1939. Her mother was sick, and she had to go home. Miné was lucky to find a spot on an American-bound ship; Hitler's army had recently invaded Austria and Czechoslovakia, and people were fleeing Europe in preparation for war. Miné boarded the last ship leaving France for America. On September 1, 1939, while Miné was at sea heading home, Hitler's army invaded Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany, and World War II had officially begun.

Back in California, Miné was hired by the U.S. Army to create mosaic and fresco murals in San Francisco and Oakland. She worked with a famous Mexican artist named Diego Rivera.

In 1940, Miné's mother died. Miné remembered her in a painting, "Mother and Cat/Miyo and Cat," which she painted in 1941.

As war raged in Europe, Miné moved into an apartment with her younger brother, Toku. The United States had not officially entered World War II, although tensions between the U.S., Germany, and Japan were rising. Miné and Toku had no idea how drastically their lives were about to change.

On December 7, 1941, Japanese troops bombed an American naval base at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. One day after the Pearl Harbor attack, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) declared war on Japan, launching the United States into World War II.

Suddenly, although Miné and Toku were American citizens, they were considered the enemy because of their Japanese heritage. Suspicion and fear about Japanese-American spies reached a fever pitch, despite a report published in the fall of 1941 to the contrary. The Report on Japanese on the West Coast of the United States, also known as the "Munson Report," assured America that "There is no Japanese 'problem' on the Coast. There will be no armed uprising of Japanese.... [The Nisei] are universally estimated from 90 to 98 percent loyal to the United States ..." (Niiya).



"Mother and Cat/Miyo and Cat," 1941

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In spite of the Munson Report's claims, the U.S. government decided to take action against Japanese-Americans to "protect" America. Years later, Miné explained some of the "precautions" taken against Japanese-Americans: "Contraband such as cameras, binoculars, short-wave radios, and firearms had to be turned over to the local police.... It was Jap this and Jap that. Restricted areas were prescribed and many arrests and detentions of enemy aliens took place" (Okubo, 10).

On February 19, 1942, FDR signed Executive Order 9066, which stated, "the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage" (Exec. Order No. 9066). To this end, the order gave the government power to "relocate" Japanese-Americans (now considered "enemy aliens") to specially designated areas. This policy became known as internment. Within three months of this order, 110,000 people of Japanese heritage were moved into internment camps scattered throughout the western states.

On April 23, 1942, Miné and Toku were notified that they had three days to pack their belongings and report to an "assembly center" for relocation. The preparation orders said: "Evacuees must carry with them on departure for the Assembly Center, the following property:

Bedding and linens (no mattress) for each member of the family;

- Toilet articles for each member of the family;
- Extra clothing for each member of the family;
- Sufficient knives, forks, spoons, plates, bowls, and cups for each member of the family;
- Essential personal effects for each member of the family.

All items carried will be securely packaged, tied, and plainly marked...The size and number of packages is limited to that which can be carried by the individual or family group" (Thomas). Anything that internees couldn't carry with them when they reported to the assembly centers had to be left behind: precious family mementos, beloved pets, jobs, and friends. They left home unsure whether they would ever be allowed to return.

When Miné and Toku arrived at the assembly center (actually a church in downtown Berkeley) on April 26, they saw guards at every entrance and surrounding the building. "A woman seated near the entrance gave me a card with No. 7 printed on it and told me to go inside and wait," Miné wrote later. Then she was called into a room for a detailed interview. "As a result of the interview," she wrote, "my



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family name was reduced to No. 13660. I was given several tags bearing the family number, and was then dismissed” (Okubo, 19). For the rest of their time in the internment camps, Miné and Toku were referred to by this number, not by their names. Guarded by soldiers with weapons, Miné and Toku boarded a bus and were driven to Tanforan, another assembly center. When they arrived at Tanforan, they were told to strip and then given a medical examination: “A nurse looked into my mouth with a flashlight and checked my arms to see if I had been vaccinated for smallpox,” Miné wrote (Okubo, 31).

At Tanforan, a former horseracing track, Miné, Toku, and the other internees were housed in horse stables. Miné described the first time she saw her new home: “The place was in semidarkness; light barely came through the dirty window on either side of the entrance. A swinging half-door divided the 20-by-9-ft. stall into two rooms... Both rooms showed signs of a hurried whitewashing. Spider webs, horse hair, and hay had been whitewashed with the walls. Huge spikes and nails stuck out all over the walls. A two-inch layer of dust covered the floor ...” (Okubo, 35).

Inadequate and dangerous conditions were common in the camps. Some internees reported being housed in cafeterias and bathrooms because the camps were overcrowded. The camps were designed to keep Japanese-Americans isolated from the rest of the country in remote areas. This often meant that they were located in the middle of the desert, exposing internees to searing heat during the day, freezing cold at night, and rattlesnakes at any hour. In addition, many of the camps had been built quickly, like Tanforan, and were not finished by the time the first internees arrived. Due to unfinished bathrooms, some internees had to use outhouses, which were unsanitary and afforded little to no privacy. Finally, the presence of armed guards in the camps led to tragedy in a few cases when internees were killed for not obeying orders.

Miné and Toku lived under strict rules at Tanforan. Anyone leaving or entering the camp was subject to a mandatory search, and internees could only see visitors in a special room at the top of the grandstand. Miné wrote, “We were close to freedom and yet far from it... Streams of cars passed by all day. Guard towers and barbed wire surrounded the entire center. Guards were on duty day and night” (Okubo, 81). Internees were not allowed to have cameras, but Miné wanted to document what was happening inside the camps. She put her artistic talent to use making sketches of daily life inside the fences.

After six months, Miné and Toku were transferred to Topaz, an internment camp in the Utah desert. As at Tanforan, Miné experienced isolation from the outside world, a near-complete lack of privacy,



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and the feeling of being reduced to a number. She continued chronicling the internee experience, as well as writing letters to friends back home. She also taught an art class to children in the camp and illustrated the front cover of *Trek*, a magazine created by the internees. She took a chance by entering a Berkeley art contest through the mail, and she won.

As a result, across the country, the editors of New York's *Fortune* magazine saw some of Miné's artwork. They decided to hire her as an illustrator for a special April 1944 issue of their magazine featuring information on Japanese culture. But she had to act fast; *Fortune* had asked her to arrive within three days. She had to submit to extensive background and loyalty checks to get permission to leave Topaz. After being cleared to leave, she set off for New York, wondering how she would be able to readjust to life as a free person again.