

VINTAGE

Saints & Sinners

Mary Paik Lee (1900-1995)

1. We landed in San Francisco on December 3, 1906. As we walked down the gangplank, a group of young white men were standing around, waiting to see what kind of creatures were disembarking. We must have been a very queer-looking group. They laughed at us and spit in our faces; one man kicked up Mother's skirt and called us names we couldn't understand. Of course their actions and attitudes left no doubt about their feelings toward us. I was so upset. I asked Father why we had come to a place where we were not wanted. He replied that we deserved what we got because that was the same kind of treatment that Koreans had given to the first American missionaries in Korea: the children had thrown rocks at them, calling them 'white devils' because of their blue eyes and yellow or red hair. He explained that anything new and strange causes some fear at first, so ridicule and violence often result. He said the missionaries just lowered their heads and paid no attention to their tormenters. They showed by their action and good works that they were just as good as or even better than those who laughed at them. He said that is exactly what we must try to do here in America—study hard and learn to show Americans that we are just as good as they are. That was my first lesson in living and I have never forgotten it. (p13-14)

2. Because of the negative feelings toward Orientals in Colusa (California), we never got enough clothes to launder, and we could not earn enough money to meet our needs. After paying the rent, light, water and other bills, we had very little left over for food. Mother would tell me to buy a five-pound sack of flour, a small can of baking powder, salt and two cans of Carnation milk for the baby. The two cans of milk had to last for one week: it was diluted with so much water, it didn't look like anything nourishing. Mother made tiny biscuits each morning and served one biscuit and a tin cup of water to each of us three times a day. During the time we lived in Colusa, we had no rice, meat or anything besides biscuits to eat. Nonetheless, when we sat down to eat, Father would pray, thanking God for all our blessings. This used to irritate me. At the age of eleven years, I couldn't think of anything to be thankful for.



Once he was sitting out on the front porch smoking after dinner, and I asked him what we had to be so thankful for. He said, "Don't you remember why we came here?" I had forgotten that the fate of our family in Korea was much worse than ours. Nevertheless, my stomach ached for lack of food, and I had severe cramps. One evening the pain was so bad I got up to fill myself with water, which helped somewhat. As I neared the kitchen, I saw Father and Mother sitting across from each other at the table holding hands, with tears flowing down their faces. I realized then how much agony they were suffering and that my own feelings were as nothing compared to theirs. I had been so absorbed in myself that the thought of my parents' suffering had never entered my mind. Seeing them that way made me realize how ignorant I was. It awakened me to the realities of life. (p22-23)

3. On Sundays, about seven Korean families came to our house for services. We sang hymns, without music. Father preached a short sermon, then Mother served lunch. Everyone stayed and visited. No matter where we lived, Father always invited people to come to our house for a brief time of worship. He never asked for an offering, and Mother served whatever food we had for lunch. One Sunday, as Father was praying, I noticed that the little children were sneaking

out. I followed them and found them eating whatever food they could find. The children could not help themselves; those were “hungry years” for all of us. Wages were low and work was hard to find. It was the custom among us to take some food as a gift whenever we went to visit friends. Father laughed when I told him not to make his prayers so long because the children would eat up everything in the kitchen. (p53)

4.I started my second year of high school in Willows. The atmosphere in school was chilling; none of the students except one spoke to me, but my good luck was working for me again. The girl who sat across the aisle from me in several classes was very friendly and eager to talk to me. Her name was Margaret Finch. Strangely enough, although there were many Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans cultivating rice in Willows at that tie, there were no Oriental students in the school, so I was an object of curiosity. During lunch and after school, Margaret always talked to me and we became friends.

One day she asked if I would like to go to church with her. She said she went to the Presbyterian church, which was not far from our house. I asked Father about it. He said, “Why not? Maybe times are changing.” He told me to go and find out. He was always the optimist I told Margaret I would meet her at church the following Sunday. Something told me to go early and find out what kind of person the minister was, so I took three of my brothers and started out. As we neared the church, we saw a man standing in the doorway. As we were walking up the steps, he placed his arm across the door and said, “I don’t want dirty Japs in my church.” My reply was, “Would it make any difference if I told you were are not Japanese but Korean?” He said, “What the hell’s the difference? You all look alike to me.” He just glared at us with hatred in his eyes and told us to “go to hell.” So we came back home and told Father about it. He just shook his head and didn’t say a word.

Mary was very annoyed with me for not meeting her at church. I told her what had happened. She said, “I don’t believe it.” I shrugged my shoulders and replied, “Well, it’s the truth.” The next day at school she said, “My father wants to talk to you after school.”...[Superior Judge French] listened very intently, told me to go to church the next Sunday, and he guaranteed that I would be welcomed there...Father was very pleased when he heard. He said it often takes someone of courage and position to turn things around.

The following Sunday...the minister was evidently waiting for me. He ran down the steps, shook my hand, and said, “You are welcome in this church.” He was like a different person; he went out of his way to introduce me to a surprised congregation...The congregation follows the leader whether they like it or not. In time they all became friendly and discovered that we, too, were human beings. (p54-55)

5. My stay in school was a constant battle of wits. My English teacher was an old lady with a sour face. It was a common practice to give the nonwhite students lower grades than the whites, but one day she was so unfair, I protested. Her eyes were blazing with hatred as she said, “If you don’t like it, get the hell out of here. We don’t want you here anyway.” (p56)

6.In thinking back to my parents, the Bible describes their way of life: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) I am glad they lived long enough to see the promise of a better way of life for their children and grandchildren. I am the only one left who remembers them as they were in 1905 when we left Korea. They were a handsome couple...After working all day in the fields, he spent much time in the evenings teaching us the Korean alphabet, telling us Korean history, describing his boyhood days fishing for trout in the stream that ran through Grandfather’s property---trying to give us an idea of who we were....

My parents came to America with high hopes for a better way of life. Mother said they expected life to be difficult---not knowing the language, without money---but they had put their faith in God and were determined to survive whatever hardships came their way. That faith was their only comfort and refuge throughout their lives. (p132-33)...Young Koreans growing up in comfortable homes with every advantage open to them will find it difficult to realize the sacrifices made by the first generation. It is very gratifying to me to see the progress our family has made from poverty to where we are today. It is nothing spectacular but a good firm foundation has been laid on which our future generations will find it easier to build their dreams. (134)