

Stories from a mountain town: Finding Otomatsu



Searching for my grandfather's grave site 70 years later

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OCHI, Japan — I finally found my grandfather, Otomatsu Ishii, after 70 years.

Otomatsu Ishii, 29, left Japan aboard a merchant ship in 1902. In return for three years of hard labour building the Penticton Railway in B.C., my grandfather received his Canadian citizenship and made his way to Kingcome Inlet, northeast of Vancouver Island, to do what he loved, fishing.

In 1917, Asa Kajikawa, 28, came to Canada from Hiroshima as a picture bride. She was a widow with two young sons. She wanted to provide for her children and thought that she could send money back from Canada and see them again. This would not be the case.

My grandparents first home was a floating house along Kingcome Inlet, where they had two daughters (Hisako and Harue) and two sons (Yoshinobu and my father, George). In 1929, Otomatsu bought half of North Rendezvous Island, north of Vancouver Island, about 160 acres. The family worked hard to clear and cultivate the land. Two more children, Asao and Toshiko, were born on the island.

When Grandmother Asa came to Canada, she didn't know that Second World War change their lives forever. My grandparents and their children were sent to internment camps, despite being Canadian citizens whose children were born in Canada. Forty years of Otomatsu's life in Canada were reduced to one suitcase for each family member.

At the end of the war, my grandparents were given a choice, either move east of the Rockies or to Japan. In 1948, Otomatsu

Japan, including his hometown. His brother had died and there was nothing left of the family home. At 75 years old, he had nothing in Canada or Japan and couldn't provide for his children. He was heartbroken and told his children to find their way back to Canada. Grandmother Asa searched desperately for her family who lived near Hiroshima but could not find any trace of them. She presumed that they had died when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. She was devastated.

After the family arrived in Nushima, George and Harue left to find work in Osaka. My grandparents stayed in Nushima with Toshiko and Asao, so they could finish school. Otomatsu died of cancer on July 15, 1949. His last request was for his ashes be placed in the Ishii gravesite in Nushima.

At the end of that year, George, Asao and Toshiko returned to Canada, sponsored by Hisako and her husband. Harue followed and Grandmother Asa finally rejoined her family in Toronto in 1962 and died in 1966.

Nushima is one of the smallest of the inhabited islands in Japan, 10 km in circumference and with a population of 400. Rich in spiritual history and located off the southeast coast of Awajishima



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

The Ishii family gravesite in Nushima, Japan.

Island, people have lived there since 400 BC and fishing has always been part of their lives. Nushima is one of the legendary Onokorojima Island places appearing in the famous Kuniumi story (Japan's creation mythology). The story says that the gods Izanagi and Izanami churned up the sea with a spear and when a drop of seawater fell back to the sea it solidified to become Nushima Island. The couple created a towering 30-metre pillar on the coast called Kami Tategami Iwa (God Rock) and were married on

top of the rock. They gave birth to Awajishima Island as the first island of Japan.

This August, I arrived in Ochi, Japan, to work as an assistant English teacher with JET, the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program. The beautiful nature, rugged green mountains and rice fields and clear water took my breath away.

I told many people I met in Ochi the story of my family history and my desire to visit my

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The *Little House* Review: Reading between the lines

Kyoko Nakajima's prize-winning book is translated to English

Kelly Fleck
Editor

Virginia Lee Burton's children's book, *The Little House*, was published in 1942, a year after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and joined the Second World War.

In the story, a small red-roofed home in the idyllic countryside watches curiously as urban sprawl spreads in the distance, until the house is engulfed in skyscrapers and mansions.

Looking scrappy and forgotten, the little house accepts that it will soon be demolished.

The story inspired and is intertwined into Japanese author Kyoko Nakajima's novel of the same title, *Chiisai Ouchi*, which takes place in a European-style house with a red gable roof in the suburbs of Tokyo.

Set between the economic boom of the 1930s to the end of the Second World War, the occupants of the little house watch as the Pacific War encroaches and makes their lives smaller and contained to the house.

Published in 2010, *The Little*

House won the prestigious Naoki Prize, for popular literature by a rising author that year. The novel was translated to English by Ginny Tapley Takemori and was released in Canada by Darf Publishers in November.

The story is told by Taki, who arrives as a teenager to the house, to work as a maid for the Hirai family: Master Hirai, his young bride, Tokiko and her son from her first marriage, Kyoshi. Taki's friendship with Tokiko over the next 15 years becomes the most significant relationship in Taki's life.

Now an old woman, Taki writes

"As the war worsened, the everyday life of the people, that's what I wanted to write about," says Nakajima.

her memories in a journal. As the family's maid, she uncovers and protects the Hirai's secrets.

"What I have learned from doing this kind of work over many years is that if there are a hundred families, there will be a hundred different types of couples. Anyone such as a maid, who enters the inner circles of a family through their work, should not go spreading gossip about the family situation for their own amusement," says Taki.

Not until the very end of the book do we learn that there are secrets Taki hides even from the reader.

The story is filled with domestic details that become more significant as the war worsens and rations become tighter and Taki tries to preserve normalcy in the home.

Details like the bento lunches Taki packs for Kyoshi on Patriotic Services Day, (beginning in 1939, the population was supposed to honour the soldiers by abstaining from luxuries).

Children were expected to bring a plain lunch of white rice with *umeboshi* plum in the centre to resemble a Japanese flag.

Nakajima discovered in reading children's journals, that mothers and maids would go around these rules by lining the bottom of the bento with a

thin layer of rice, adding finely chopped dried bonito with soy sauce, or tiny shrimp simmered in soy sauce and mirin, covered with sheet of crisped nori and concealed beneath another layer of rice with the requisite plum on top.

A rare glimpse into everyday life, Nakajima's extensive research to write this book included consulting woman's magazines and children's journals to create an authentic portrait of the times.

While this story is set during the war, it is not a war story, but instead a story of average people

whose lives were interrupted by the war.

"As the war worsened, the everyday life of the people, that's what I wanted to write about," Nakajima told *Nikkei Voice* in an interview.

"So I thought that taking one woman, just an average woman, and making her the voice."

Taki's recollections are intercut with interruptions from the present, in the form of her college-age nephew, Takeshi, commenting and questioning the validity of her story.

Through Takeshi, the reader is reminded that other things happened during war and this is only just person's perspective.

A subtle and delicate story, it focuses on how generations understand and talk to each other and laments that questions aren't asked until it is too late and things are left unsaid.

The final chapter, told by a different narrator, cuts through Taki's story, distorted by her love

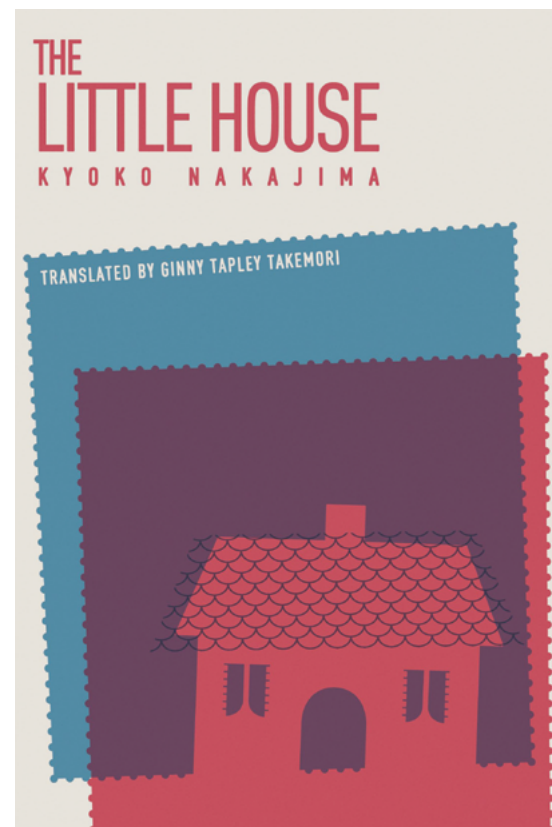


PHOTO COURTESY: DARF PUBLISHERS.

The cover of *The Little House* by Kyoko Nakajima, translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori.

and loyalty to Tokiko and tries to uncover the things she never said.

A final secret revealed on the second last page, makes you want to flip the book right back to the beginning and look for clues between the lines.

The Little House (Darf Publishers) by Kyoko Nakajima is available at most major bookstores for \$25.50.

We the East (think Raptors): Japanese Canadian champs

The success of Japanese Canadians after moving East of the Rockies

Lynn Deutscher Kobayashi
Contributor

TORONTO — On my mind is the challenge of connecting the histories of Japanese Canadians, in the East, West and Central Canada. I contemplate the experience of my maternal step-grandfather, Takeichi “TU” Umezuki.

As the long-time Japanese editor of *The New Canadian*, he received the Order of Canada for his role in connecting the dispersed Japanese Canadian community during and after the war.

My dad’s father, Tomoaki Joseph Kobayashi, was the Japanese editor of the *Montreal Bulletin* from 1949 to 1968. Mel Tsuji, who was hired by TU, back in the day, recalls marveling at TU’s painstaking work of laying out Japanese characters for the printing press.

I remember visiting my grandfather at *The New Canadian* office in its dark, narrow quarters on Queen Street West. Despite the technology tools we now have to connect across the country, through video conferencing and multi-channel communications, how much do we really know about each other?

East of the Rockies for most Japanese Canadians meant Ontario and Quebec. Many like my parents' families wanted to settle in Toronto, but a 1942 Resolution by the Toronto Board of Control set a quota on the number of Japanese Canadians who could enter the city and many moved even further east to Montreal.

I was born, raised and educated in Montreal, but migrated to Toronto in the late 70s. I have lived in Ottawa and spent three summers working in Vancouver where I was able to connect to my B.C. cousins and left part of my heart there, the birthplace of my mother, father and many great aunts and uncles.

Many others resettled in Hamilton and the Niagara region—stories of which were documented in the book, *Exiles in Our Own Country: Japanese Canadians in Niagara*, by my mother, Addie Kobayashi. Eventually most Japanese Canadians in the east ended up in Toronto, which in 2016 accounted for 25 per cent of the community's population, with a slightly different demographic from Vancouver which has a 10 per cent higher proportion of new immigrants.

What Japanese Canadians have achieved in the East is remarkable considering the hostility and hardship that met them. The Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre (JCCC), founded in 1963 and designed by Raymond Mori-



PHOTO COURTESY:

Lynn Deutscher Kobayashi, Marie and Sid Ikeda at the Japan Day celebrations with the Toronto Raptors and Washington Wizards at Scotiabank Arena on Jan. 17.

yama, was a dream realized when a group of Japanese Canadians committed to funding the centre by assuming second mortgages.

My grandmother, Chiyo Tsuyuki (later Umezuki) was part of this founding group.

For close to sixty years dedicated leaders, volunteers and philanthropists like Marty Kobayashi and family, and Sid and Marie Ikeda, to name but a few, have been the backbone of

the JCCC. At the Toronto NAJC AGM on Jan. 19, a Yonsei attendee remarked on how difficult it was to imagine the commitment of those who sacrificed personal property for the betterment of the community.

The story of the champions of redress in the east, Obata, Omat-su, Kanbara, Kogawa and others,

may not be as well known in Canada as its recounting in *Justice in Our Time* but the Toronto NAJC is working to improve on this gap in redress history by producing a digital version of the book, *Japanese Canadian Redress: The Toronto Story*. My father, Bill Kobayashi, was the President of the Toronto NAJC when redress was achieved. I was lucky

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grandfather's gravesite. When I told my friend Rika Kataoka, a generous, caring and enthusiastic person, she said, 'let's go to Nushima!'

Rika asked me about my grandfather and Nushima to locate my Otomatsu's gravesite. I contacted my aunt Tomo in Toronto, who is our family's unofficial historian. She provided more details and photos to help us with our search. Rika spoke with the Minamiawaji City Hall to ask how she could find a gravesite in Nushima. Rika was surprised when she received a call from the Nushima branch office. They told her they found Otomatsu's gravestone, in Renkoji Temple.

On Dec. 7, 2019, I went to Nushima with Rika, and my good friend and fellow JET Lee Yeonkyung as support. It was a three-hour drive to the Nada Dongho Harbor in the southern part Awajishimi Island, where we took the 10-minute boat ride to Nushima.

Seeing the outline of Nushima island in the distance, I felt like I was in a dream. We were picked up at the ferry terminal by the owner of the guesthouse where we were staying called Asayama.

After a delicious local fish dinner prepared by the guesthouse, the owner said she would call some of the older people on the island. She thought someone might have been around at the same time as the Ishii's and re-

member them. She called a few people with no luck.

The next morning we went to the Renkoji Temple. Rika had made an appointment with monk Takimoto-san. We walked up the stairs and narrow alleyways to the temple, on top of a hill with large trees, manicured shrubs and stone pathways. Takimoto-san came out to the steps of the temple to greet us. The inside of the temple was even more beautiful with intricate gold artwork, delicate woodwork, large windows and it filled with sunlight.

Takimoto-san brought out the official book of death records. Each entry was written in beautiful shodo (Japanese calligraphy).

"In the end, we cannot erase the pain and suffering we and generations before and after us will experience. However we can pass on the love."

He pointed out what he thought was the record of my grandfather's death in the book. He showed me the entry, Rika read the kanji to me, “Otomatsu Ishii who died on July 15, 1949.” It felt surreal to find something you've been searching so long for.

Takimoto-san and his wife invited some older women from the town to join us for tea in case they could remember the Ishii family. We discussed their lives in Nushima and they shared photos, but they did not remember the Ishii family.

As we were chatting, Takimoto-san's wife noticed an elderly woman leaving the graveyard be-

side the temple. She invited her to join us and we asked her about my family. She said she remembered an Asao Ishii from Canada. I said, “that’s my uncle!” We all breathed a big sigh of relief and smiled, mine the largest, because the connection had been found.

We had the official record of my grandfather's death at Renkoji Temple. But to have someone who was in contact with my family when they were here, in a way, felt like it proved my existence.

Takimoto-san said he said he thought he found the Ishii gravesite but wasn't sure because it hadn't been taken care of in 70 years. He brought us to it and cleaned up the kanji with his fingers. I could read the kanji for Ishii and Rika read the rest. He lifted the gravestone and explained that families used to hide the ashes of their loved ones inside the gravestone monuments. He glanced inside but couldn't see anything. I looked at the stone and touched it.

In seeing my grandfather's gravestone and putting my fingers on it, I felt that I was touching something profound inside of me that I hadn't been touched before. It was the pain, sadness and guilt that my grandfather carried with him when he died. It is now known through the study of epigenetics that ancestral pain and suffering can be transferred from one generation to the next through altered genes from traumatic events.



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Takimoto-san looking through the official book of death records at Renkoji Temple. Each name was written in beautiful calligraphy.

We had heard about the famous Kami Tategami Iwa rock and wanted to see it. At the top of a long hill, with steep cliffs, the raging ocean and a rugged shoreline and we saw the giant rock jutting from the sea.

Ishii means stone or rock in Japanese. I call the famous rock an Ishii of love. In fact, it is an island of love. The gods Izanagi and Izanami fell in love and created Nushima. My grandfather was born here, wanted to return after the war and asked to be buried here because he loved this island. I return here because of my love for my grandfather.

In the end, we cannot erase the pain and suffering we and generations before us and after us will experience. However, we can pass on the love in our hearts for the places and people that we care

about deeply.

I found Otomatsu, and in doing so, I found myself.

One night in Nushima, I was walking on the rocks by the shoreline, watching the brilliant red-orange sunset. I spoke in a silent soliloquy to grandfather Otomatsu. I told him why I had come, how things had changed in how people view the Japanese in Canada, and I thanked him for all that he did. The winds blew sharply suddenly, and I thought I heard my grandfather whisper to me, “I know Caroline, thank you for coming.”

Afterward: Recently, the elderly woman we met in Nushima, sent us a letter and a faded photo she found. The picture was of a group of handsome young boys in Nushima and there was Asao!
