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Mindfulness in the city: Is an apology ever too late?



Reflecting on the meaning of the B.C. Redress announcement

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OTTAWA — I was drinking a latte in a trendy Ottawa cafe when I read about the \$100-million initiative recognizing the historical wrongs committed by the province of B.C. against Japanese Canadians during the Second World War on May 21.

"May 21 is a day of significance that recognizes the first arrivals of Japanese Canadians to the Greenwood, Kaslo, New Denver, Slocan City, and Sandon internment camps in 1942," the office of B.C. Premier John Horgan said in a news release.

I thought of my grandparents and their children, including my father, George, who passed away in 2012.

Eighty years ago, they uprooted my family from their home on Rendezvous Island, north of Vancouver Island, stripped them of their possessions, and forced them into the Slocan internment camp for four years.

My grandfather and father were part of the advance parties of Issei and Nisei men sent to the interior of B.C. to prepare the ghost towns for Japanese Canadians. They left behind their fami-

ly, not knowing if they would see them again.

Tears poured down my face, and there was a big knot in my heart. How did my family endure the unjust and cruel racist treatment?

I cried because my family, except my uncle Arthur who is now in his 90s, would never know that the B.C. government acknowledged "the hardships and trauma people suffered because of government inaction and action before, during and after the war." I wished I could tell them.

I could drink my latte in this cafe in freedom, without people leering at me as "an enemy alien." There was no apparent racism or hatred from others while I sipped my drink. I didn't feel fearful or guilty for being there.

The secret

Internment camps were a deeply buried secret in my family that I didn't learn about until I was 17.

My history teacher, Mr. Hillary, talked about internment in class one day. He liked to teach topics students often couldn't find in the history books, one of the reasons his lessons were so popular. I went home from school that day surprised and confused.

Mr. Hillary told us that the Japanese Canadians were taken away from their homes and interned during Second World War under the cabinet-approved Order-in-Council P.C. 1486, stripping them of their civil liberties, personal freedoms, and possessions. It was a grave error made by the Canadian government.

I perked up in class when I heard Japanese Canadians, thinking, that's me. I wondered if my parents would know anything about this. They spoke little about their past and certainly not this.

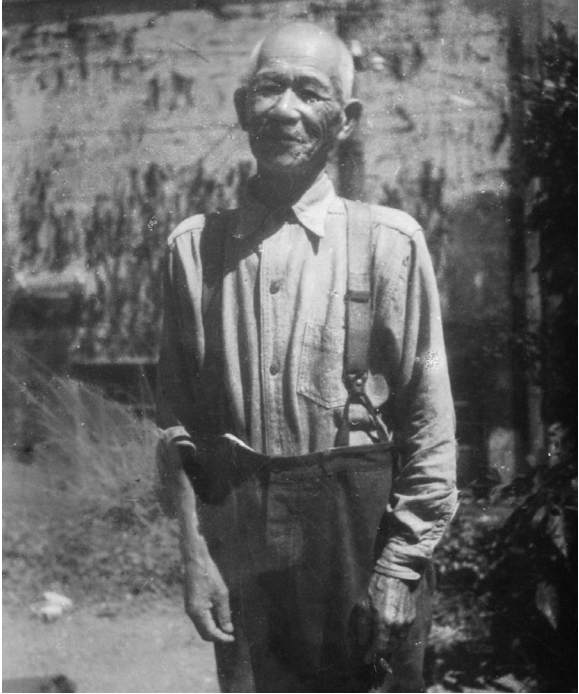


PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Left: Passport photo of Asa Kajikawa, coming from Hiroshima as a picture bride to join the husband she had never met, Otomatsu Ishii, in Canada. Right: Ojiichan Otomatsu Ishii returned to his hometown of Nushima, Japan after the internment camps, 40 years later after he left for B.C. He died shortly afterwards in 1949.

During our family dinner that night, I asked my father about internment, and to my shock, he said, "Yes, we lost everything and were put in camps." What surprised me more than anything else was that he had never mentioned this to me before.

A typical 17-year-old at the time, I didn't think much about my parents' backgrounds before this history class, absorbed in my world of high school and trying to fit in, but also stand out enough to get special attention or praise.

"Turning Japanese"

Around this time was when the song, *Turning Japanese*, was released by the English band The

Vapors, and all things Japanese were "in" or trendy, including Hello Kitty, PAC-MAN, Astro Boy, Sailor Moon, and me. I was in by the very fact of my looks.

I never thought then how different it was for my grandparents and parents.

During the Second World War, Canada was at war with Japan. Japanese Canadians were categorized as "enemy aliens," even though most were Canadian by birth or naturalized citizens. They were not "in" and didn't even have the right to vote until

1949.

At the end of the war, internees had two options. Go East of the Rockies or be "repatriated" to Japan, despite many of them being born in Canada. They couldn't return to their homes from before the war.

My Ojiichan Ishii chose to return to his hometown of Nushima, Japan, some 40 years later, taking his family with him. Ojiichan Ishii never made it back to Canada.

Unrequited love

I believe Ojiichan Ishii always loved Canada, where he realized

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not bilingual, as assistant editor of the English section, I also had a weekly job connected with the material to be published in the Japanese section.

So my weekly *New Canadian* routine went like this: To get each issue published and distributed by mail on Friday each week, Tom and I did some work on the English section on Sunday and completed it after Monday and Tuesday.

Then one special box in our office kept getting carbon copies of each Japanese-language item. Umezuki-san and Mayeda-san made those copies by hand. So using a Japanese-English dictionary, I typed an exact English translation of each *Nihongo* report or article.

When all the issue material was in copies, that was sent by train to the Enemy-Language Censor in Vancouver. Then we waited until late Thursday for the comments.

The reaction could be O.K. Or eliminate part of a piece. Or don't publish it at all, etc. Our job was to obey the instructions, make changes, or find replacements for the parts that were censored. When complete, the entire package went to the printer next door.

My bilingualism came in handy, as Roy Ito's must have done. I also learned how to use the Japanese-English dictionaries quickly to get an issue's material ready in time.

And although I did not expect

it then, *The New Canadian* work eventually helped me when I became a Japanese-language interpreter-translator in the Canadian Army, serving in Southeast Asia during the final year of the Second World War.

In 1944, after six months on *The New Canadian* staff, I left Kaslo to rejoin the Moritsugu family, who had left the Tashme family camp to move to Southern Ontario.

There we were one of three evacuated JC families who were tenants on the former Ontario Premier Mitchell Hepburn's large Bannockburn Farms, south of the town of St. Thomas.

It was some time afterward in Southern Ontario that my work in Kaslo with the censor helped my future. That was in early 1945, when the ban against us joining the Canadian military was finally lifted.

So about 150 Canadian Nisei volunteered for the Canadian Army. And while most of them were training in Canada, two small groups of JC soldiers with minimal training were rushed to Southeast Asia. I was in the second group.

After reaching India at Bombay (Mumbai), our group of 23 Nisei was rushed to the nearby city of Poona, where Force 136 of the British Army Intelligence

Corps was based.

And each of us privates was tested for our Japanese language (particularly speaking and reading) ability.

The tester was Trevor Leggett, an Englishman who had spent some years in Japan and had become famous as a judo leader in Britain.

Later I learned that when he tested us, he had been a Major in the British intelligence force we Canadians were being attached to. In our group of 23 Nisei, he passed only five of us as able to handle Japanese prisoners of war, etc. without any further study.

This example of the unthink-

"The New Canadian work eventually helped me when I became a Japanese-language interpreter-translator in the Canadian Army."

ing assumption that if we looked Japanese, we must speak and read Japanese was why our group and the first group were rushed to Southeast Asia because Japanese-language interpreter-translators were badly needed by British forces there.

At least the majority of the JCs who volunteered after the racist ban was lifted not only got a full basic army training and then language training at the Canadian Army's setup in, of all places, West Vancouver.

The first Nisei graduates of S-20 training school were rushed to Asia and did contribute to setting things straight now that the

war was over.

It seems that the reason why I happened to be one of the few linguists rushed to Asia was my family background. As the oldest son of a mother who had been a public school teacher in Japan before her marriage and coming to Canada, I was taught *Nihongo* at home much more than most of my Nisei friends. And the magazines my siblings and I got were those from Japan.

And those weekly translations I did at *The New Canadian's* Kaslo office during wartime also contributed to my being able to pass the language test in Poona, India.

And when Leggett-san checked me, he gave me a document in *Nihongo* to translate.

I was able to do that to most of the words. And he concluded, "If you had a *jibiki* (dictionary), you could translate that all, couldn't you?" I agreed, and so eventually, in 1946, I was promoted to sergeant in the Canadian Army Intelligence Corps attached to Force 136 in Southeast Asia.

But 80 years later, looking over my memories, although the whole thing was a mistreatment, I suppose that there were some "blessings in disguise" that made enduring much easier.

In 1961 (16 years later), I met Trevor Leggett for the second time. The occasion was the Third

World Judo Championships held in Paris, France.

I was there as vice-president of Judo Canada, with Frank Hatahita (also of Toronto), who was the president. He was also the coach of the two white lads who were our competitors. Unfortunately, they didn't do well.

In Paris, when the British judo delegation arrived, I saw someone I knew. It was Trevor Leggett, who was a high-ranking judo leader in Britain and was head of the British team. I went up to greet him in *Nihongo* and thought what a great small world we were in.

The big story of the event was that after the first two World Championships held in Tokyo were won by top Japanese, the winner of the third championship in Paris was Anton Geesink of the Netherlands. In the semi-final and final, he defeated the top Japanese judoka.

Like other foreign judoka, Geesink had spent some years training in Japan before this event.

Back to Yard Creek: The location of our Second World War work camp, where Japanese Canadians like me were sent in 1942, was recognized as an impressive place in the B.C. interior. So it was established in March 1956 as Yard Creek Provincial Park.

So if you're on the Trans-Canada Highway between Sicamous and Revelstoke, you can drop by to check this special place out.

From MINDFULNESS P.6

many of his dreams. A beautiful island with a cherished homestead and a dream life he had created from the ground up through hard work, a successful fishing business, his picture bride, and six children.

But his love, Canada, called him names, took everything he built and owned, put him and his family into a camp, and didn't allow him to return home after the war. It must have been hard on him.

Maybe Ojiichan realized at some point, as I did when my long-term relationship ended, that someone may turn their back on you, but it's not easy to erase the memories from your heart. The love and excitement that took you there in the first place and kept you there for what you thought would be forever still linger, even though you are not together anymore.

My father and mother, Nisei or second-generation Japanese Canadians, were happy enough with the formal apology in 1988 and more so with the compensation. But I wouldn't say they were ecstatic.

Looking back, I think it was surreal and bittersweet for my parents. By 1988, it was 40 years after they were interned. They were children then, memories distant, and the Redress Agreement brought on feelings of sadness for what their parents had to

endure and that they were no longer around to hear the apology.

Whispers of shikata ga nai

More than this, I believe they heard the whispers of their parents, often saying *shikata ga nai*, meaning, it can't be helped, let the past go.

Shikata ga nai helped my grandparents endure being taken away from their island and home to being sent to internment camps in ghost towns, and upon release, realizing they could not go back to their homes that were initially promised to them, everything they owned sold or destroyed.

Generations that came afterward, mostly the children of Ni-

"My Ojiichan Ishii chose to return to his hometown of Nushima, Japan, some 40 years later. Ojiichan Ishii never made it back to Canada."

sei, were shocked and outraged by what happened to the Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. They felt that the time for *shikata ga nai* was over and believed that something needed to be done to acknowledge this dark mark in Canadian history for all Canadians.

Righting the wrongs

I'm grateful to Art Miki, the National Association of Japanese Canadians, and countless others that worked tirelessly to seek a formal apology and compensation for Japanese Canadians from the Canadian government. This work led to the historic Redress Agreement, signed in Ottawa on Sept. 22, 1988.

Being of Japanese descent, I feel that the collective shame and pain of being Japanese in Canada during the Second World War was in my DNA. If we can pass on hereditary characteristics and diseases from one generation to another, why not traumatic experiences?

The formal federal apology in 1988 and now the provincial redress this month made me feel that our family finally belonged in Canada and eased the collective shame we felt for being who we are. We were Canadians because we were born and lived here, but I am not sure we belonged before.

Without recognizing our wrongs and apologies, we could repeat the same mistakes. We have collective guilt and discomfort over the words unsaid, and there

is always a ball and chain around our ankles, holding us back from moving forward together.

How do we overcome shame? Brown says, "If we speak our truth and share our stories with people who respond with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive."

This is why the apologies are necessary. And why an apology made late still matters.

I'd like to think that my grandparents, who were long gone when the Redress Agreement was signed, knew it happened and cried tears of joy. And with the B.C. Redress announcement, they could breathe a sigh of relief and stand taller, and prouder.



Caroline's father, George Ishii, returned to Canada from Japan after his dad died in 1949. He worked as a cook at Leaver Mushrooms in Campbellville, Ont.

They got back their dignity.

There are so many things that happen in our lifetimes that could harden us. People and organizations, and even the government, in this case, wrong us. Loved ones turn their backs on us when we need them most. And people we love die before we can apologize to them and express what they meant to us.

We may not see an apology in this lifetime for the wrongdoings of others against us and the people we love. But this may not be the end of the story.

Ojiichan Ishii must have thought that he saw the end of

the story when he died in 1949.

However, like with all stories, we never know where we are in the story. We may think it's the end, but it may be only the beginning. One of my favourite proverbs goes, "Just when the caterpillar thought the world was ending, it turned into a butterfly."

The B.C. announcement gives the Japanese Canadian elders, past and present, who survived the internment camps, a sense of belonging, identity, and home, at long last.

Welcome back home, Ojiichan Ishii.
