

Powell Town after the Outbreak of the Pacific War, 1941-1942, by Tsutae Sato

Translated with preface by Eiji Okawa and Landscapes of Injustice Research Collective, part 3 of the series, Community Records and the Human Experiences of the Uprooting of Japanese Canadians (eokawa.nikkeiplace@gmail.com)

In the last two articles we grappled with the significance of the forced dispossession and displacement of Japanese Canadians in the 1940s by examining historical records of a store on Powell Street, Ebisuzaki shōten. This piece will continue to engage the same issue but from a different perspective. Japanese Canadian community records are rich and diverse. So far, we have looked at several letters, flyers, and business records. There are also diaries, essays and stories from the period that express the emotional, social and intellectual responses of Japanese Canadians to the policies of the government that were uprooting their lives in ways that they never imagined.

The text that we will look at this month is taken from *Tsutae and Hanako Sato fonds*, held today in the Nikkei National Museum in Burnaby. As longtime teachers at the Japanese Language School on Powell Street in Vancouver, Tsutae and Hanako were prominent educators in the community who dedicated their lives to the education of the Canadian born Nisei (they retired in the 1960s). They also left us a large body of written materials pertaining to their public and personal lives and the administration of the school. From their records, introduced here is a text entitled *Powell Town after the Outbreak of the Pacific War, 1941-1942 (Taiheiyōsen boppatsugo no Paueru-gai 太平洋戦勃発後のパウエル街, Sato fonds, 1996.170.4.2 1/1-1, Nikkei National Museum)*. To my knowledge, this is an unpublished hand-written collection of stories and essays that compellingly deals with some of the most pressing issues that confronted Japanese Canadians at the time: What was happening to them and why? What should they do? What was to come?

These questions should be considered in light of the period that Tsutae chose to focus on, 1941-42. The war broke out in the tail end of 1941. Immediately, Japanese Canadian fishing boats were seized by the Navy and impounded. Language schools were shut down, as were Japanese newspapers. The government designated the coastal region of British Columbia as “protected area,” and Japanese presence there was problematized in the name of national security. Eventually, all persons of Japanese ancestry were removed from the area, resulting in

the “internment,” forced dispersal, and the liquidation of properties that Japanese Canadians had no choice but to leave behind. In hindsight, we know these to be interrelated historical facts. But in 1941 or 42, these were not matters set in stone but real-time events in the making. Many Japanese Canadians who entrusted their properties under the “care” of the Custodian of Enemy Property did not know that their properties would later be sold without their consent. The women, children and men who were crammed into the Hastings “manning pool” probably did not know where they would stand in a year’s time. In fact, it was not even clear who would win the war.

All this is to say that to appreciate the text, we ought to unbound ourselves from the dictates of hindsight that conditions our evaluation and interpretation of history. We need to recognize the profound uncertainty of the period, and recover the constraints and possibilities that had immediacy and reality to the inhabitants of the past. My sense is that Tsutae wrote *Powell Town* sometime between 1942 and the summer of 1945 when the result of the war had become clear to everyone.

Powell Town features nine stories and essays that were written in the form of a dialogue. As the title suggests, the setting is Powell Town or Street (*Paueru-gai*) during the transition between the relatively settled life of Japanese Canadians in the pre-war era and their radically remade life during the internment years. In the dialogues, Tsutae and his fellow Japanese Canadians talk about a range of subjects including rumours about future reparations for the economic losses that were being incurred during the war, movements to resist government measures, conflicting allegiances to Canada and Japan, and the fall of Etsuji Morii’s attempt to appoint himself and his associates as the formal representatives of Japanese Canadians as a whole and liaise with the government. Not surprisingly, there is a resounding anxiety that run throughout the text. All the same, it also provides glimpses of the diversity and cacophony in the attitudes and responses of Japanese Canadians to government policies and pronouncements.

Each dialogue has a title except for the one presented below, which offers Tsutae’s critical analysis of the government’s treatment of his people. It is uncertain why Tsutae did not give it a title, but perhaps because it is abstractly political he did not know what to call it. A key theme in the dialogue is the place of the people of Japanese ancestry in Canada, in particular the Canadian born Nisei. Tsutae was a firm believer in the idea that the Nisei should remain in

Canada and work patiently to attain full civil and political rights rather than going to Japan or its colonies in Asia in search of opportunities. No doubt he was aware of the discriminatory barriers that stifled the Nisei's career paths in Canada. But still, he felt that the place for the Nisei was Canada. Moreover, he stressed that the war constituted an abnormal state of diplomatic illness. Once it was over, he thought that conditions should improve to create opportunities for the Nisei and the Japanese people to thrive and prosper on this side of the Pacific.

A term in the dialogue that is tricky to translate is *dōhō* 同胞. This word is roughly synonymous with Nikkei as it is used today, and it was typically invoked by the Issei to refer to their community. However, the meanings and connotations carried by *dōhō* differ from those associated with Nikkei. According to the Japanese dictionary *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, *dōhō* refers to “people who were born in the same country or national-land” (*onaji kokudo ni umareta mono*), “people of the nation or ethnicity that are uniform” (*dōitsu no kokumin, dōitsu no minzoku*). In addition, *dōhō* literally means “siblings born from the same womb,” which is quite viscerally pointing to an organic understanding of ethnicity that linked people to the qualities of their homeland. Viable English translations of the term include “nation” and “our people,” but below, I use the original where translation is awkward or erase the term's complex nuances.

Dōhō alludes to the ethnic consciousness that was important to many Issei. That said, being a *dōhō* did not preclude being a dutiful citizen of Canada. To me, what is compelling about Tsutae's writing is his articulation of the evolving configuration of ethnicity, citizenship and political institutions in Canada. When he wrote the text, the barriers that marginalized the *dōhō* people's rights in Canada were hard facts of life. But he envisioned a future in which those barriers would be dismantled, and he felt it was the mission of the Nisei to achieve that goal. In hindsight, the Nisei, with their political determination and resolve, realized that goal. But that came after what in effect was the ethnic cleansing of the *dōhō* people from the coastal region and the merciless destruction of their economic foundations. Indeed, the economic rise of Japanese Canadians in the post-war era is a testament to the indomitable spirit and work ethic of the Nisei. All the while, *dōhō* has virtually become a dead word, seen only in antiquated texts from the bygone era. How did this word become obsolete? How did the collective identities of Japanese Canadians evolve and change over the course of the previous century? Answers to these questions might cast light on the broader questions of who we are, where we come from, and

how the legacies of the 40s have influenced, and continue to influence, our sense of self in Canada.

Lastly, I am following the original text in not providing the names of the speakers of the dialogue. To clarify, it is Tsutae who speaks the long lines to discuss issues and respond to questions raised by the person to whom he is speaking, who is not identified. That is, Tsutae is the second speaker. The translation below begins not from the start of the dialogue but a midway point, just after Tsutae's lengthy explanation for why he thought moving to Japan was not the best course of action for the Nisei to take.

“You are saying that from individual and social perspectives, and with consideration for the development of the nation, going back to Japan is undesirable.”

“That would be the conclusion. But as I said before, it would be an entirely different story if you have a set of special skills, or have the perseverance and the insuperable spirit to match those of the people of the ‘inner land’ (*naichi* 内地=Japan posited in relation to its colonial territories) and are determined to work toward the construction of new Japan. The thing is, if one has grown up here, the work and the challenges that life in Japan would entail would be overwhelming. Therefore, the Nisei need to stand on this soil to work together with Canadians, advance together with them, and become equal to Canadians economically, legally, socially, and culturally. That is not going to be an easy task, and it will take a long time. But it is also going to be a great mission.”

“The problem is, even if we tried to work with them, they won't accept us.”

“Sure, but they don't exclude us completely. It's more correct to say that they keep us excluded from certain areas. That's the problem of the Japanese expulsion (*hainichi* 排日).

“The fifty-year history of the *dōhō* is a history of the Japanese expulsion, isn't it.”

“That's right. The discrimination against Japanese has been persistent, and it will likely never die out. Consider how the Jews have been oppressed and excluded again and again in different

countries. Still, we have been fighting the anti-Japanese movements step by step, and we have been expanding our social foundations. The Issei of the past did not understand the language and could not adapt to the Canadian culture or take up its customs. Legally, moreover, their sphere of activity was tightly restrained. Even then, however, they persevered, and they worked hard to attain their current standings. When they first arrived in Canada, they didn't even have homes. They simply followed jobs and went into the mountains and the sea in search of jobs. That was the era of transience when our people were sojourning migrant workers. But soon enough, they began to carry rice bowls and chopsticks. Then they got married, and led meagre married lives. Next came the children. Though not wealthy by any standard, they managed to sustain themselves and their humble lives with the children they embraced. Now, the children have grown up. Life was just becoming easier. More and more people were beginning to own homes and land. Indeed, they have come a long way. Their lives were becoming culturally rich. True, they tasted the bitterness of the discrimination. But gradually, they were becoming more and more recognized by the whites. And just when they were thinking about bequeathing the world to the Nisei, their children that is, this big blow came. What a devastating setback this is. Economically, we have been thoroughly destroyed. Our freedoms have been taken away. The Issei, the naturalized persons, and the Nisei all have been confined into the category 'Japanese.' The path for the advancement of our people (*Yamato minzoku* 大和民族=*Yamato* nation or ethnic people) has been totally foreclosed."

"Exactly. How can you not want to challenge the government?"

"Put it this way, until now, the Nisei have been receiving education to be good Canadians, and make no mistake, they are by no means inferior to the white people (*hakujin*). The current measure by the government is exceedingly cruel. But we must not forget that we are in the abnormal and ill-state of war. As I said already, they are forcing us to move because they fear fifth column and sabotage. In addition, cheap politicians who make a living by selling Japanese sentiments have been instigating a hysteric antagonism toward the Japanese among the mass. On newspapers, they expound how the Japanese in Manila formed a fifth column, how the Japanese in Singapore, Davao, and Java are linked with fifth column activities, and so on. They write as though the coastal region would be bombed by Japan anytime. When that happens, they tell their audience that local Japanese residents would stage a massive political disturbance. With wild

stories like that, the politicians are stirring fear among the mass. Moreover, the regular anti-Japanese propagandists would not miss this golden opportunity. Through frivolous cartoons on newspapers, they spread the notion that Japanese are traitors who stab their enemies on their backs and sever the enemies' heads while they are sound asleep. Such caricatures likely encouraged the government's decision to move Japanese nationals of military age out from the coast. Initially, Prime Minister King had not intent to move all Japanese, but the people have been riotous and would not accept anything else. And what happened as a result is this full-blown relocation of all Japanese."

"Democracy has become toxic."

"That's right. The Japanese are now driven out of agriculture, fisheries, lumber industry, labour force generally, and commercial and business sectors. And what's the result of that? Industries and production have halted, and the government was forced to drain huge sums of money from the national treasury. There was no need for that. Look, sabotage was carried out not by the Japanese but the government itself. With respect to the move, there is no appropriate place for the Japanese to go. The anti-Japanese propaganda has spread everywhere. I hear that people living in remote areas and the east, who know next to nothing about the situation, are really buying into the menacing image of the Japanese. Because there is no place for us to go, the government has come up with the road camp which is no productive at all. The clearing pool at Hastings Park and ghost-town projects in the interiors, too, are costing the government lots of money. But even then, the Japanese are not content. Rather than carrying out these desperate measures, it would have been much better if the government had moved us to other provinces and put us in more productive industries. They should have found many more projects like sugar beet farms."

"The government panicked, didn't it."

"Oh, we have digressed from the topic of the Japanese expulsion."

"Yes, we were talking about how the anti-Japanese movement never ceases."

"The two biggest problems behind the Japanese expulsion are racial prejudice and economy. The economic rationale for the oppression goes like this: 'the Japanese have a low living standard, so

they are okay with low wages. But we white workers cannot compete with them. We are striving to improve our living standards, but our efforts are undermined by the Japanese.’ This kind of argument are made by the working class and small-business owners. But low wages are welcomed by the capitalists. If the Japanese expulsion was simply a matter of wages, then the problem would be resolved if the Japanese demanded and received the same wage as white workers, wouldn’t it. In fact, the living standard of the Japanese has been rising notably. But there is no end to the oppression. And that’s because of racial discrimination. But none of the various arguments used by the propagandists to justify the oppression has the substance to persuade the wise. The prejudice stems from psychological sentiments and hatred. It is no more substantial than saying ‘I hate his guts,’ or ‘I don’t like him.’ But such childish notions are insufficient to fabricate the pernicious anti-Japanese rhetoric and attract a large following, especially in a country that embellishes democracy and humanism. Therefore, they say that the Japanese are inassimilable and that we don’t cooperate with the main stream. They say that we are always thinking of Japan and have no interest in Canadian politics. These notions are exploited to rationalize the oppression. To be sure, we need to reflect on some of these points...”

“What they want to do is to treat the Japanese as an exceptional case.”

“It seems that way. Legally and socially, East Asians are not treated as equal to the whites. Consider the legal aspect. In schools, they teach that ‘good Canadians are keenly interested in Canadian politics.’ But they don’t even give us the right to vote. These days, the Japanese have improved their economic standings, and some are trying to move into wealthy neighborhoods like Shaughnessy Height and Point Grey. But the residents despise that, and local people become very nervous when the Japanese set up their shops in premium areas like Granville Street. They criticize our advancements and denounce us as ‘invaders’ and ‘threats.’ The exclusion in the fisheries, agriculture, mining, and forestry need not be mentioned. On surface, all of these exclusions appear to be motivated by economic factors, but what lies beneath is racial prejudice. Recently, we have been negotiating with white workers to ease the tension and friction that exist between the Japanese and the whites in different industries. To that end, the Japanese have been joining Canadian unions to work with the white labour force in agriculture, fisheries, labour, metal work, hairstylists and barbers and other sectors. This is a highly effective strategy to mitigate the tensions but it does not resolve the problem at its core. Oh, I almost forgot. There is

another reason for the high-strung Japanese exclusion in recent years. And that is the rising influence of Japan in the East. Many white people assume that the Japanese are racially and culturally inferior to them, but in fact, Japan has amassed power and influence in Asia to the point that the British and Americans are being pushed out from Asia by Japan. The arrogant notion of ‘the imprudent Jap’ is mixed together with the fear of Japan to create a charged hostility against the Japanese in the US and Canada. The propagandists declare that the Japanese state is behind the Japanese advances in industries, Japanese soldiers in the disguise of Steveston fishermen are spying on Canadians, and Japanese schools are funded by the Japanese government. All of these are lies, but they sure are making a lot of noise with such unfounded claims. Needless to say, these demagogic notions are closely related to the fear of Japan.”

“At any rate, the Japanese expulsion is ever-present.”

“Yes, at least with respect to certain matters. But there are ways to reduce the discrimination. The acquisition of the right to vote and making advances on economic and cultural fronts are the great missions that lie ahead for the Nisei. But things might go well for the Nisei, because they have many friends from school. Their friendships should endure, meaning that in the future, the Nisei would have connections with politicians, business people, and leaders and specialists in various fields. They would be able to work with their Canadian friends and cohorts to mitigate the discrimination, and count on their support to obtain franchise.”

“But now, with the forced dispersal, the prospect for achieving these lofty goals has become extremely grim. There is hardly a light of hope left.”

“Certainly, there is no chance now. But after the war, things might go well. It all depends on the outcome of the war. That would determine how the economic losses that we are incurring now would be later compensated. It would also affect how problems related to the right to residence, deportation, property, education, and culture would be handled in the future.”

“Would that also have a bearing on the right to vote?”

“Not directly I don’t think but indirectly. What is important is the following. Regardless of who wins the war, we need to minimize the damage of the war, and prepare ourselves for our project of growth and development when the war is over. For that, we must refrain today from acting

upon our emotional impulses to cause unnecessary problems and commotions. We certainly would regret it later if we ‘tie ourselves up with our own ropes,’ so to speak, and worsen the damage. Regarding the relocation, we should be thinking about the future. The idiom, ‘do not forget about chaos amid order,’ has a point, but it is also important not to forget about order amid chaos. I think the Nisei’s move to the east is good, and so is the move to sugar beet farms.”

“Some say that you’re not Japanese (*sic. hikokumin* 非国民=anti-national) if you go to sugar beet farms or road camps, because you would be supporting the enemy industry. What do you say to that?”

“I’ve heard that. On surface, it may seem like a good argument. And it might be valid if all the 23,000 *dōhō* in Canada were to return to Japan, in so doing giving up on the future lives in Canada. But the *dōhō* will develop and prosper here in Canada. And our children and descendants are destined to thrive and flourish. That, precisely, would constitute a notable development in the advances of our people (*sic. Yamato* nation) abroad, and that is the dire wish of the Japanese state. From such a perspective, the argument has little basis.”

“Mayor Cornett is saying that all Japanese should be deported, and you know very well that he is not the only one calling for deportation. When they have their way, we won’t have a choice but to go back.”

“That’s just politicians trying to win popular support. They are not only exploiting the hysteric sense of fear among the mass but also stirring it, all to make names for themselves. Britain and the US are saying that the current war is fought for democracy and that they are going to eradicate the Nazi. But look, Canadian politicians are emulating the Nazi. Indeed, cheap politicians are attracting a lot of attention with the rhetoric of deportation, but Canada should have politicians with bigger visions. And let’s us not forget, the Nisei are Canadians. Just where can they be deported to? Realistically, the deportation is not possible...”