

1942

Part 4 of the series, Community Records and the Human Experiences of the Uprooting of Japanese Canadians, by Eiji Okawa and Landscapes of Injustice Research Collective

“We were as uproarious as potatoes being washed in a tub of water” (*oke no kuchi de arawareru imo no yōna sawagi o tei shita* 桶のクチで洗はれるイモのような騒ぎを呈した)

With this expression, Hirayama Ichirō described the chaos that took hold of Japanese Canadian society (sic. *dōhō shakai* 同胞社会) from Pearl Harbor to the forced dispersal in 1942. Ichirō was from Steveston. But when he wrote his op-ed piece that appeared in January 1, 1949 issue of the newspaper, *Tairiku Jihō* (*Continental Times*), he had settled in his new home, Winnipeg.¹ The above passage is taken from that piece, entitled “From the Move to Today” (*idō kara konnichi made* 移動から今日まで). Ichirō packed that piece with his thoughts and emotions on his experiences in the last seven years. For Ichirō, the precious memory of Steveston—where he was born and raised, where he saw his parents die, and where his heart throbbed when he met his first love—was vivid and dear to his heart. So were the faces of his old friends at road camps that were set up along the railway. He saw them, in passing like a flash, from the window of the train that carried him across the Rockies. From the window, he shouted out to them so loud that he lost his voice. His fellow passengers, out of comradery and love, threw from the window fruits and *bentō* to the men who worked the road.

As poignant as Ichirō’s account is the potato metaphor. It suggests the complexity of Japanese Canadians experiences in the 40s. On the one hand, they did not simply wilt to the power that be like grass before wind. But on the other, they were helpless in the face of the policies that uprooted their lives. They could not change the policies. Nor could they tame the riotous and hysteric anti-Japanese propaganda that was spread by selective politicians and ideologues. Japanese Canadians of the time called them “anti-Japanese specialists” (*hainichi-ya* 排日屋) who made a living by selling racist rhetoric. Politically disenfranchised and stripped of civil rights, Japanese Canadians were tossed around by the might of the Canadian state, even as they dissented and acted up in ways they could.

No doubt, the entire decade of the 40s was extremely disruptive for Japanese Canadians, but the year 1942 stands out as being especially unsettling. That was when they were forced to leave their homes. The government established what was called the “protected area” along the coast from which people of Japanese heritage were to be cleared. It announced its plans to set up camps and facilities that would absorb them as they were driven out of their homes. Ichirō, for example, took the train on April 23, 1942 to head to a sugar beet farm in Manitoba.

While the mass relocation was a watershed in the destruction by the government of the Nikkei communities of the pre-war era, the actual move was no simple matter. Many families from rural areas were forced to stay temporarily in the notorious make-shift shelter at Hastings Park in Vancouver before being dispersed to various sites. Families, in the most worrying time of the war, were split because some people happened to be in Japan when the war broke out or because men were forced to go to road camps. It was of course not just a matter of moving people. Schools were closed and newspapers were shut down. Stores were seized and so were homes. Curfews were imposed, radios were confiscated, alcohol was banned, and righteous souls among the Nisei and naturalized persons who protested the government’s measure that split families were summarily apprehended. Kōjirō Ebisuzaki, Nancy Morishita’s cousin who used to deliver goods from Ebisuzaki store on Powell Street to customers on Vancouver Island, was among the persons who were detained for protesting.

What, then, was life like for Japanese Canadians in 1942? How did they navigate the pressures and policies that dismantled the foundation of their social existence? What records have been left to us from the time, and what do those records tell us? In this article, I want to introduce some materials that allow us to grapple with these questions, and for that, I will draw again on the *Morishita Family collection* and *Tsutae and Hanako Sato fonds*. These are part of the Japanese Canadian community records held at the Nikkei National Museum in Burnaby. To recall, the *Morishita collection* includes record of the Ebisuzaki store on Powell Street, which was ran by Nancy Morishita’s father, Teiji Morishita and his family before the war. The *Sato fonds*, on the other hand, contains voluminous records of the Japanese Language School on Alexander Street in Vancouver. Featured below are translations of selective texts from the two collections that give us glimpses of the experiences of 1942.

The first text is from Tsutae Sato's "Powell Town after the Outbreak of the Pacific War" (*Sato fonds*, 1996.170.4.2.1/1-1, Nikkei National Museum). This is the same collection of dialogues or dialogical essays that I introduced in the last article. Likely written sometime between 1942 and 1945, the text features nine dialogues between Tsutae, who was the principal of the school, and Japanese Canadians who are usually anonymous. Below is the second dialogue in "Powell Town," and it is a conversation between Tsutae, the second speaker, and a woman whose family had just arrived in Vancouver from their home somewhere in the coastal region of British Columbia.

Who Will Come Home First?

"It's been a long time since we last spoke. We all came to Vancouver as a family. We were supposed to go to Hastings Park, but we have been allowed to stay in the city."

"What did you do to your home?"

"We boarded it up. It's such an old, rotten house. But we lived in it for twenty years. The kids were born there. We're all very attached to it. We all cried when we left it."

"Yes, your home is on the coast where air is clean. It's a healthy place. And really, your home is a crystallization of the many years of your hard work."

"The stuff that we left behind, too, are all junk. But it's sad to sell them off. So we stuffed them in the room and boarded it all up. We have no idea when we can go back home. The kids have grown up, more or less, and, you now, we were just saying to ourselves that finally things would become easier from now on ..."

"A lot of people are in the same situation. How sad and regrettable... But I think you folks have it rather good, relatively speaking. Some people from the coast were given no time or chance to bid farewell to their homes. They had to leave immediately, and each person was allowed to carry one suitcase only. They left their homes just with the clothes that they were wearing and a few things."

"I know...the ordeal that many people had to go through. It's so miserable..."

“The war is just awful... But we ought to remember that there are many people on the frontline. They are sacrificing their lives for the cause.”

“If we see things that way, then we are really on the easier end of the spectrum.”

“At any rate, it’s a winning war. Let’s wait until it’s over. Luminous times should come.”

“When we left the house, we said to ourselves, ‘Who will come home first? Who, among us, would be the first to open the front-door again?’ We then had a sad and miserable laugh...”

“That must have been very painful...”

“How is Tetsuji-san doing?”

“He’s hiding now. According to my husband, he’s saying, ‘Why in the world would I send my son east? That would be the end. He’d be taken by the Canadian army. It’s because they can’t conscript soldiers in BC that they’re lying to us, and taking our boys east to be conscripted. They’re going to be shipped over to Europe. My son is Japanese. He will never be a Canadian soldier. It’s much better to be interned.’ Soon, he’ll be arrested by the Mounties, and will be taken to the Immigration Building (imin-kan 移民館).”

“Madam, regarding conscription, it doesn’t matter if you’re in BC or in eastern provinces. It’s all the same. Conscription is not a provincial matter but a federal one. In my opinion, the Nisei should move east.”

“Is that so?”

“Up to now, we have crowded ourselves in BC, excessively. And we have been fighting among ourselves over small and frivolous matters. All the while, wise people have been saying that we should move east. But the weather is nice in BC. Water is good, food is rich and diverse, and there is an abundance of good fruits. It’s also close to Japan. In short, life is easy in BC. So there has been no need to move east, and no resolve or guts to do so either. As for me, previously, I had some reservations about moving east, but now, I believe that an opportune time has come. We ought to muster our courage and migrate eastward. I have been encouraging young people to move east rather than being interned.”

“But, won’t they be taken by the army?”

“We don’t know that for sure, but the chances are very slim. It was November two years ago, if I recall correct, when the anti-Japanese mood was in full rigor in BC, Ottawa set up a special committee on the Japanese problem and sent four or five officials to Vancouver to investigate the situation. They summoned several Japanese, including me, and also some white people for questioning. I was called up, and met with the committee in Hotel Vancouver. When the topic turned to military service, I asked Mead and Sperling, who were serving as investigators, ‘The Japanese would be happy to serve in the Canadian military. They would be proud to be treated, equally, as true Canadians. But recently, the Nisei are frustrated and disenchanted. Why? Because they are denied military training. Could you explain to me why they can’t join the army?’ To this, Sperling replied, ‘Some of our soldiers are very ignorant. They have little education and can’t make sound judgments. If a war broke out between Japan and Canada, many soldiers of this ilk might harass and abuse the Nisei soldiers. We are concerned about that. I don’t think it’s right, but...’ That’s what he said. Also, what’s fueling the forced dispersal and the camps is the hysteric fear of sabotage and fifth column by the Japanese. Given that, conscripting [our boys] would contradict the government’s stance and policy. It likely won’t happen.”

“Is that so, but...”

“Oh, it’s getting dark. We don’t want to get into trouble with the curfew. I will go now.”

“Please come again.”

Letters from the *Morishita Family collection*

The three documents to follow are translations of letters in the *Morishita Family collection*. The letters were written in Vancouver by Kentarō Ebisuzaki, Kinuko Ebisuzaki and Hide Ebisuzaki, and sent to Teiji and Sawa Morishita and their children including Nancy in Raymond, Alberta. Hide was Teiji’s older sister, and Kentarō was Hide’s eldest son thus Nancy’s cousin. Until early in 1942, the Ebisuzakis and the Morishitas were running the store Ebisuzaki shōten, which was located at 377 Powell Street. In March of 1942, Teiji alone went to Raymond. Initially, he was to go to a road camp, but that would cause the family to part because his wife and children would not be allowed to join him there. Hence, he made arrangements to move without government

support to Alberta, where his family would be able to join him. In late April, Sawa, Nancy and her siblings joined him in Raymond. But as the Ebisuzakis remained in Vancouver, the family was in fact split. Hide's husband Masatarō was in Japan.

Teiji's records (which became *Morishita Family collection*) show that the Morishitas and Ebisuzakis maintained close relations and helped one another as they confronted various problems. The letters below allude to some of those problems, including the dissolution of the store and the dealings with the government, but they also portray the general process of the displacement of Japanese Canadians and speak to us about the emotional dimension of that experience. Moreover, they show us that the human business of living and dying went on for Japanese Canadians, even when things were far from business as usual.

Kentaro Ebisuzaki's letter, April 9, 1942 (*Morishita Family Collection*, 2011.79.11.1c-10 / MS85, File 3, Nikkei National Museum)

The first letter was written by Kentarō. It probably addressed Teiji. Only the first page of the letter seems to have survived, hence it ends rather abruptly. In the letter, Kentarō is referring to a problem that involved both him and Teiji, but what exactly that problem was is not mentioned. Whatever it was, Teiji had telegraphed him about it, and it required an action in Vancouver by Kentarō. The problem may have been related to their store or home.

I received your telegram yesterday. I felt that what you wanted to convey was not entirely clear in the telegram, but since the matter was pressing, there was no other way but to deal with it the way I did. I am sorry that we have not sent you any letter for a while. Without news from Vancouver, you must be very concerned. Unfortunately, there is no one here to consult or seek advice. We can only deal with one thing at a time. Being worried is not going to help, is it? Given the situation, it might be best to think that we have thrown everything away. If the family stays together and stay healthy, the time may come when we can smile again.

The associations of naturalized persons and the Nisei have been negotiating with the Commission. They have been urging the Commission to send women, children and the elders to a safe place. The Commission accepted that demand, and it will oversee their relocation in the coming months. However, the Nisei are demanding that both they and the naturalized persons are full-fledged citizens of Canada, hence ought to be treated by Ottawa as such...

Kinuko Ebisuzaki's letter, May 10 (*Morishita Family collection*, 2011.79.1.1.1c-21 / MS85, File3)

Kinuko, who was married to Kentarō, wrote the next letter to Sawa Morishita. At first, I was hesitant to include this letter in this article, not least because Kinuko tells Sawa that the letter should be thrown in fire after Sawa has finished with it. By sharing the letter with you, then, I would be violating her wish. However, as she putted it, she didn't want anyone else to see it because she was uncomfortable with her Japanese. I believe what she meant was that she didn't want anyone to notice errors in her writing. But her Japanese was fine. She wrote *kanji* characters much more elegantly than I would ever write them, and by sharing with you my English translation of her letter and not her original writing, I feel that her wish would not be disgraced while readers can enrich their sense of history by engaging with what she had to tell Sawa. Errors, in this case, are entirely mine, not hers.

The letter gives us hints of what life was like in Vancouver when Japanese Canadians were being dispersed. But the most pressing matter for Kinuko was her little boy, Toyotarō. He was sick. He was hospitalized with meningitis, and they were in fact unsure if he would make it. When Kinuko wrote the letter, his conditions were improving. Unfortunately, however, it was not long after the letter that he succumbed. In a separate undated letter written by Kentarō, we see that many fellow Japanese Canadians who were still in Vancouver attended his funeral, and the ephemerality of Toyotarō's life was evoked by his Buddhist posthumous name, Gyōun 暁雲 or "Cloud at Dawn."

We are glad to hear that you all arrived safely. The countryside must be strange and amusing in its own right for the kids... Toyotarō has had a fever since the 5th. When I nursed him, he wouldn't take much milk. So we took him to Shimokura-san's, who said he should be fine. But the symptom became worse. When we took him to a hakujin doctor, we were told that it might be too late. So we put him in the hospital immediately. On the second night, he coughed up blood three times, and we thought we lost him. For a whole day after that, he didn't even recognize our faces.

The doctor says that because he had a high fever for such a long time, his lungs became infected, and the bacteria in the lungs went into the spinal cord to cause meningitis. We don't know anything for sure yet. When I went to see him on May 8th, he looked as though life was out of him. He simply dazed at me. I think he recognized me, but he wasn't even able to cry, let alone raise his hands or anything like that. All he could do was to look at me. He simply lay there looking at me, opening and closing his eyes. I am so worried that I can't sleep at night. The doctor says that there is a chance that he will recover. We should know in 24 hours. They've extracted fluid from the spinal cord, and they're putting it under some kind of a test. They say that once they determine exactly what the sickness is, they will cut his veins in his leg and inject medicine into his body. I want to stay with him at the hospital, but they won't let me. I can only see him three times in a week. I'm so worried, and so is everyone else in the family. These days,

no matter what I'm doing, his smiling face and his grim face as he lies in the hospital bed are right here in my eyes.

Because of Toyotarō's condition, Ken-chan (Kentarō) has asked for an extension until the 14th. We haven't talked about anything here yet. Yoshi-chan, together with her/his mom and dad, went for a kensa (examination or investigation), and they have been granted extension to the 20th. Tomo-chan, too, went for a kensa, and they have been extended to the 13th. Therefore, they are still here. Yo'-chan's younger brother is detained in that place. They say he will go on Monday. Nii-chan, on the other hand, may go to Greenwood with Catholic people very soon. As for us, nothing is decided, and we're all here just like when you (sic. Sawa-san) were here.

In the afternoon of the very day you left here, the Custodian came and seized the store. So we are all staying home. But we have more than enough food, so please don't worry about that. We still have lots of kyanzume (canned food). The union is still up and running so there is no shortage of vegetables. There are six of us now, all eating at home...

You know that person who Kō-chan (Kōjirō) went to see? He went back (to Japan?), and so did the woman at Sano-san's. I asked her to let father (Masatarō?) know that we're all fine.

I sent you the cushion in a box. Soon, I will send you the eye drop and kids' clothes. We just heard from the doctor. Apparently, Toyotarō's condition has much improved.

Tateishi-san has come back, and they may be going together with the rich people...

Fumi-san just had a baby boy in the hospital at 5 o'clock today. She was in pain for three days, so the midwife couldn't help her. She had to go to the hospital. The canary lay three eggs today, and it's sitting by the eggs to keep them warm.

They say that letters written in Japanese will be slow to deliver, so I will be writing in English from time to time. I hear that Raymond is going to be very hot from now, so please take care of yourself, and especially the children. Please say hi to everyone.

Sawa-san, my Japanese is bad, so please don't show this letter to anyone. Just put it in fire as soon as you read it. I lent my dictionary to Kō-chan, so I don't have it any more. Hope your eyes get better. Bye for now.

May 10th

To Sawa

From Kinuko

Hide Ebisuzaki's letter, May 21, 1942 (*Morishita Family collection, 2011.79.1.1.1c-16 / MS85, Folder 3*)

Hide's position differed from that of Kinuko and Kentarō. Hide was Kentarō's mother, and she, together with Teiji, was in the administrative position of the store which was founded by her husband, Masatarō. Her letter addressed Morishita-san, which perhaps referred to Teiji and Sawa. In the letter, Hide expresses her concerns about the store and their home. She also mentions various happenings in the community including what was happening to other stores in Powell town that were being liquidated and or transferred to new operators.

I am relieved to hear that you are doing well, but it must be awfully inconvenient that the water there is so bad. People in New Westminster all went to a place called Kaslo. People in Vancouver, too, are gradually leaving. Those with money are free to choose where they go. Watanabe-san is wealthy, but s/he is going to stay with others. S/he will hang together with binbōnin (sic. poor people, but referring perhaps to the ordinary folk). Watanabe-san is not an exception; there are lots of people like that.

Etō-san from Aldergrove came by and told me that the beets (sugar beets) have been canceled. Etō-san's farm is worth \$6,000, but they sold it for \$1,400 to a hakujin who is already occupying it. They don't know where they are going. I went to the Club (Nippon Club), and I heard that there are more than 100 families that are in a similar situation. In fact, the rumour has it that the Security (BCSC) has about 9,000 people who don't know where they are going.

Toyotarō is sick. It began with a cold and turned into pneumonia. It then developed into a bad illness called meningitis. Actually, he was in a critical condition, but he seems to be improving now. I hear that it's cold at night where you are. Be sure to stay warm, and take good care of yourselves. Things must be inconvenient, but it's all for the country.

With the sick person we are not going anywhere. We received a letter from Kō-chan, much to our relief.

The people in Hastings Park are still there. The store on Powell Street will likely be gone this month. Hama-san's store has been taken over by a hakujin. Fuji Chop Suey is up for sale. As for Nichi-Ei Takakura, it's being auctioned off. Actually, we may have an auction sale at our store soon as well. Security (BCSC) is saying that of our inventory, Japanese goods are worth \$400 while goods of this country are worth \$800. But they are going to do what they like with it....

The Custodian is inquiring about Masatarō's insurance. If I need you to send it to me, I will let you know by telegram...

When we leave this place, what shall we do with the house? Some people are selling things to pawn-shop. Others are using storage services. But if we sell them, we're going to get very little money from the pawn-shop, and if we use storage facilities they will charge us quite a bit of

money. We can board up the house and stuff our things in it, but the Custodian will probably take them all anyway. Either way, don't you think that our things will be gone? I can't give you any hard facts at the moment, but we should find out soon enough. Iwamoto has been taken to the same place where Kō-chan is. I also hear that Ozaki-san, too, is coming back from the camp to go there.

If you like, we can send you salmon, shoyu, vinegar, and anything else you might need. We have 20 or 30 salmons, so just tell us how many you'd like. We'll send them to you.

Kinuko says that when we move out of this place, we can take a sofa bed and a small bed. But if we end up going to a camp, however, we will leave everything behind.

Hope you are able to enjoy your daily life. Bye for now.

Hide

Morishita-san

These are but a small sample of the historical records that provide us with the window to the complex Japanese Canadian experiences in 1942. To analyse these sources, it might be helpful to think about the following questions: What problems did Japanese Canadians face in 1942, and what options did they have to deal with them? What were some of their attitudes toward the war, the Canadian government, and Japan? What was life like for Japanese Canadians in 1942?

I'd like to close this article by thanking you for reading it, and by inviting you to send my way any comments, suggestions, questions or other queries that you may have with what I have presented in this or previous articles. As I stated in the first article, this series is part of my ongoing study of Japanese Canadian community records. Community records are vestiges of the rich lived experiences of Japanese Canadians, and they belong to the community. Therefore, your feedback is valuable, and I would be happy if I could make any contribution to the discussion and understanding of Japanese Canadian history. Please feel free to email me at eokawa.nikkeiplace@gmail.com

¹ *Tairiku Jihō* was the post-war iteration of the newspaper *Tairiku Nippō* that was printed in Vancouver until 1941 when it was shut down by the government. *Jihō* was launched in 1948. Both papers have been digitized, and anyone with internet access can view them. *Jihō* has been digitized by SFU library, and can be accessed here: <http://newspapers.lib.sfu.ca/trkjh-collection>. *Nippō* has been digitized by UBC library, and can be accessed here: <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/tairikunipp>