

Kizuna

Part 7 of the series, Community Records and the Human Experiences of the Dispossession of Japanese Canadians, by Eiji Okawa (eiji.okawa@gmail.com) and Landscapes of Injustice Research Collective

Kizuna in Japanese is a term that typically describes exceptionally strong ties or bonds between people, usually between family members or very tight friends. These days, the term has acquired a broader meaning and is used to refer to relations between people who support and trust each other generally. Someone you can count on, a friend you can trust or with whom you have shared joyous and sorrowful moments in your life, for instance, would be a person with whom you would have a kizuna.

After the devastating earthquake that struck the Tohoku region in 2011, kizuna has been invoked widely by voluntary groups to rally support for victims. In such a usage, it seems to imply a special quality of a relation that makes you feel good, supported, and strong. Apparently, however, such a connotation of the term is fairly new. In premodern times, as the dictionary tells me, it referred to a rope that tied a horse or cow to a post, and it also referred to relations between persons that can't be broken or severed. In the medieval epic, the *Tales of the Heike* (Heike monogatari), there is a line that says that a husband and a wife their children are bound by a kizuna that make them transmigrate through the endless cycle of life and death *together*. That's based on traditional notions about fate, Buddhist karma and reincarnation that our putatively "rational modern minds" might find to be a little odd. But that's also an indication of how words and language evolve over time, as do the ways in which we understand ourselves in relation to the world and the cosmos with all of its ineffable forces.

The reason why I'm introducing this concept is because the paragraphs to follow are about a kizuna of a Japanese Canadian family during the period after the war. We are continuing with the analysis of the documents of the Morishita family, housed in the Nikkei National Museum in Burnaby. In previous articles, I discussed aspects of the experiences of this family and their relative, the Ebisuzakis, during the tumultuous decade of the 1940s. The government seized their wealth and dissolved a store that they used to run together in Vancouver, Ebisuzaki shoten. The two families were closely knit but the government's policy of forced dispersal split them. The Morishitas remained in BC while the Ebisuzaki moved to Ontario.

As disturbing as the story of their loss, however, life went on for the families and they retained their bonds as they rebuilt their lives in the new era. While the government may have destroyed their material wealth, the immaterial capital that they had nurtured together during their time in Vancouver remained resilient. That capital was the spirit of mutual support and a robust kizuna which come across quite strongly in the documents introduced below.

The documents in questions are letters written in Japanese by Kentaro and Kojiro Ebisuzaki to the Morishita family. Kojiro's letter was likely written in 1946, not long after he moved to Hamilton with his wife Yaeko. Kentaro's was likely written in 1965. By that time, his side of the family had long settled in Toronto. As for the Morishitas, when the war ended, they signed up for the government's infamous "repatriation" order to be exiled to Japan. But eventually, they were permitted to remain in Canada and lived in Slocan City, BC until 1960 when they moved to Vancouver.



Image 1 is a photograph of the family, taken at Stanley Park in 1930 when the Ebisuzaki boys (Kentaro and Kojiro, that is) arrived in Vancouver. They crossed the Pacific together with Sawa Morishita, who came to join her husband Teiji in Vancouver. The young fellow in the top row fourth from the left sporting a v-neck sweater is Kentaro. Kojiro is on the far left, also in a fancy v-neck. Sawa and Teiji are the couple in the centre in the front row, and to their right are Hide and Masataro Ebisuzaki, Kentaro and Kojiro's parents. The photograph is from Nancy Morishita's private collection, and here used with her permission. Nancy, of course, is Sawa and Teiji's daughter. She is always so helpful in answering my questions.

The letters show that distance did not diminish their ties and they were ever willing to help each another, even when they were themselves struggling to rebuild their own lives after wartime ruins. Notable in particular is their attitude toward money. They were trying to give money to one another without being asked, and it seems as though they perceived their money not as their own and exclusive holding but part of a shared pool of asset that could be allocated to the other members in need. This attitude toward money stands in stark contrast with how Teiji and Kentaro presented their loan arrangement to the Custodian that we examined in the last article and was, I believe, a mentality that was engrained in their minds from the prewar experiences of running the store together.

Kojiro's letter was written to the Morishitas. Readers might know or have heard about Kojiro (Ko Ebisuzaki) who was actively involved in the community. There is a wonderful tribute to him written by

Terez Hyodo in the *Bulletin*, and it can be accessed online (<http://jccabulletin-geppo.ca/remembering-kojiro-ko-ebisuzaki/>).

What prompted Kojiro to write was a letter from Kuniko or Nancy Morishita. It is not certain what Nancy's letter was about, but she has told with me how Kojiro gave her a pair of ice skates for Christmas when she was in Rosebery (either in 1943 or 44). She had told him that she wanted ice skates, and Kojiro, being a gracious elder cousin that he was, gave her what she wanted. Needless to say, they had a close relation but it should be noted that he gave her the gift soon after being released from the prisoner of war camp in Angler, Ontario, where he was detained for protesting the government's road camp project that took men from families early in 1942. Nancy recalls how RCMP officers came to their home on East Cordova Street in Vancouver when Kojiro was taking a bath. When he came out of the bath, they took him in to the immigration building. Nancy, startled by the officers, watched the event unfold before her eyes from the top of the stairs.

In the letter, Kojiro proposes to look after a couple of the Morishita's children (they had six). We ought to keep in mind that he and Yaeko were just starting their new life in Hamilton. He also suggested that the Morishitas stay in Hamilton before moving to Japan. Surely he wanted to help the family during the time of distress and uncertainty, because the Morishitas were still contemplating "repatriation." One reason for their later decision to stay in Canada must have been Nancy jumping up and down to exclaim to her father that she did not want to go to Japan. But when the letter was written, things were uncertain and Kojiro was trying to support them in ways he could.

Happy New Year. Please forgive me for not writing for so long. I was shocked to see Kuniko's letter. It's all my fault. I am very sorry about that. As for me, I finally recovered and I have been working at a press shop since just before Christmas. I should be getting about thirty to forty dollars a week starting this month.

If you are going to stay in Canada for three or four years, why don't you come over here? The housing situation here should improve by spring. It's just the two of us here and we can help to take care of at least two or three kids. My brother and his family [with their mother, Hide Ebisuzaki] are still in a camp, but they should be coming here in spring. Today, my wife Yaeko went to a local branch of Security Commission to ask them about my brother, and they gave an okay. The war is over now, so there is no reason for them not to be allowed to move out here. Many Japanese in the area have found work at restaurants. The women are sewing. I hear that Tsuruko Ebisuzaki is working at Yaeko's company for twenty dollars a week. Tsune-san and her/his family are in a farm in Grimsby (about forty or fifty miles south of Toronto). If there is a house to live in, I think Toronto would be a better place to go.

Recently, we have had so much snow and ice. With the exception of Toronto power outage is causing major problems throughout southern Ontario.

We don't have money but I want to send you a little each week, so please let me do that.

Many of the schools in the city here have at least one Japanese student, and there are impressive schools and hospitals. As for the money to go to Japan, I will save it up for you in a couple of years, so don't worry about that.

Please take care.

January 7

from Kojiro

(Nikkei National Museum, Morishita Family collection, 2011.79.1.1.1d-10/MS85 file 4)

Kentaro's letter

It feels like Kentaro's letter is from a different epoch, and it was. For one thing, it mentions a trip from Japan in which the traveler was to depart Tokyo at eleven AM and arrive in San Francisco roughly at the same time on the same day. Yes, airplane! Commercial passenger planes across the Pacific had become common, so common that Kentaro did not even mention that the traveler was flying. To us it is utterly commonsensical that we fly when we cross the Pacific—unless, I suppose, we are indulging in the luxury of cruise ships. But that was a radical innovation. In older records, of course, we always see people going to and from Japan on ships.

Like Kojiro's this letter does not state the year in which it was written. My initial hunch was that it was written in the late-50s, but Nancy checked with her family, and it seems that it was written in 1965, for, that was the year when Toyonobu (Larry) went to Japan with the YMCA. In fact, the letter was written when Larry had just left, and the flight mentioned above was his scheduled return flight from Japan.

The letter was Kentaro's response to the money that Teiji Morishita, Kentaro's uncle, had sent him to help with Toyonobu's trip.

To everyone:

Thank you so much for sending \$200 for Toyonobu. He is a lucky boy. Five years ago, he was given the opportunity to go to Europe and now he's going to Japan. He departed on the 21st (Mon). He took the night train at eleven pm, and as he left he told us how excited he was to visit Japan where his bāchan [grandmother] was born. Teruo has gotten well and is now working. We're all happy about that. The money that you sent us for Toyonobu is just too much. I talked about it with mother and Kinuko [Kentaro's wife], and decided to take \$50 and wire the rest back to you. Even that is too much. Thanks to you, we were able to let Toyonobu take some money with him. We're very grateful for your kindness, and please don't feel bad that we're sending some of the money back to you.

We received Kimie's postcard from Winnipeg. She must be just about reaching Banff by now. We also received a letter from Misako. As I said over the phone, she is planning to arrive in Toronto on August 24th. Her itinerary sounds very good, and we think it would be great if Sawa-san joins her to come out east for sightseeing. If she comes together with Setsuko and Misako, she would not have anything to worry about. Mother and Kinuko, too, are saying that she should definitely come....

Yesterday, Toyonobu's postcard from Texas arrived. Apparently, it's very hot over there. Japan is hot, too. We're just hoping for his safe trip.

He's departing San Francisco tonight at ten at night, and is scheduled to arrive in Japan in the morning of the 29th, Japan time.

He'll return on August 14th, departing Tokyo at eleven in the morning and arriving in San Francisco at half past eleven am on the same day. He'll just have to forward his watch by 30 minutes.

In the meantime, if we hear from Toyonobu, we'll let you know.

We're not trying to reject your favour, so please don't be offended. I'm sure that we'll always be relying on your guidance and care. It's going to get hot as we get into summer, so please take good care.

June 27th

Kentaro

P.S. We have lots of space here, so don't worry and just come. We won't make you sleep on the floor (NNM, MFC, 2011.1.1.1d-5/MS84-file4)

The letters as voices from the past are packed with precious snippets of family history but for our purpose, it is the solidarity among the family members that warrants attention. They were keen to help each other and went out of their way to give money to each other. No doubt, the acts of giving can be attributed to their caring personality. But I think there was something more to it than that. What I will suggest is this: Kojiro, Kentaro, and Teiji, as men of their generations, identified their own interests and money with those of the family to a degree that most of us today don't. This is a matter of an individual's relation to a collective, in this case of the family and priority was placed on the collective. Perhaps these men did not see themselves as being separate or independent from the family as a whole, and the well-being of the family was as important as that of their own.

Their attitude toward the family must have been rooted in the prewar mode of the family's existence. During the Vancouver years the two families were united as one. Their lives were structured around the operation of the store, and while the store may have been "owned" by selective members of the family who had their names recorded in legal documents, in practice the store belonged to the family as a whole. Everyone had roles to play in the store and they all lived together. As a business, the store's goal was to generate income but that was never separate from sustaining the family. The store generated wealth that provided the material basis of the family's life in Canada. Everyone was united under the common goal of making the business prosper and supporting one another in the joint endeavour to lead a successful life in Canada.

In other words, their life before the war was not organized around the principle of "individual" property that was held exclusively by a single person. Rather, it was the principle of "shared" property that was the basis of the family life. Relations among family members and their attitudes towards one another were informed less by the ideal of the individual than that of the collective. This is not to say that the individual as unimportant but how they understood their own position in relation to the collective was different from how people in later generations have come to conceive it. It was in the context of the collective family life that the Morishitas and Ebisuzakis developed their kizuna and the spirit of mutual support, which endured long after the government forcibly brought their actual collective life to an end.