

FIRST PERSON

My grandfather figured out how to get back a little of what he lost in the Internment

LAURA SAIMOTO

CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

This article was published more than 6 months ago. Some information in it may no longer be current.

14 COMMENTS

SHARE

A

A+

TEXT SIZE

BOOKMARK



00:00

Voice

1x





ILLUSTRATION BY WENTING LI

First Person is a daily personal piece submitted by readers. Have a story to tell? See our guidelines at [tgam.ca/essayguide](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/essayguide).

In these times of polarizing racial tensions, in particular, destructive activism, I am troubled by mob destruction. Both sides of my family were interned and dispossessed by the Canadian government in 1942. They lost everything and rebuilt after the war. Colonialism, both in Europe and Asia, populated the Americas and built empires, both white and non-white. This is fact. Mob rage leading to historic amnesia, such as toppling of statues, does not wipe out the fact that this history happened.

Activism through education builds a more balanced view of our shared history. We can learn the lessons of the good, the bad and the ugly, so that we are not doomed to repeat it. In this light, I share my experience of reading the Canadian government's case file on my grandfather during the internment.

When I first opened my grandfather's file (about 500 pages), there was a handwritten number: 9609. What did this mean? It dawned on me that 9609 was my grandfather's internee number, assigned by the Office of the Custodian, the government authority. Out of the 15,000 case files on every single Japanese Canadian adult who was interned, grandfather Kunimatsu Saimoto was 9609.

I had heard stories about my grandfather, but had never met him. Both he and my grandmother died before I was born. I had seen family photos of his four seiner boats, of the family, of his house and car in Steveston, B.C., before the war. Like every granddaughter, I wanted to know more about my grandfather.

What could these government documents – declassified by the Landscapes of Injustice national university research project – tell me? As I read every page, tears began streaming down my face. Like any government authority that aims to systematically erase a people while telling themselves they were doing nothing wrong, they took meticulous, detailed records to an astonishing degree. The internment and dispossession of Japanese Canadians was a machine of organization and administration, and everything was documented.

As I continued to read, I noted the mountains of legal, financial and administrative details – the measurements of his boats, the age of the new diesel engine he had bought just prior to the war, how many lots the family house in Steveston sat on, the number of bedrooms etc. Gradually, as I connected the dots, a clear picture started to emerge about who my grandfather was as a person.

What I knew from my family was that Kunimatsu was born in 1890 in a tiny poor fishing village in Wakayama prefecture. His older brother, who was a torpedo gunner in the Japanese navy, advised him to immigrate to Canada at the age of 16 in 1907 to avoid conscription and to build a fortune in the land of opportunity. With a Grade 6 education and not knowing a word of English, he settled in Steveston and became a fish buyer. He owned four boats and had 200 fishermen working for him and sold fish by volume contract to the canneries. He married my grandmother and had 10 children. They lived in a detached house and he drove a new 1939 Dodge. He had guts, he was business savvy, he was honourable and he was a family man.

As I continued to read, what emerged was that Kunimatsu was an activist. Not in the modern sense, by holding up placards and chanting. He did not riot in the streets, loot stores, nor burn down police stations, although I'm sure he felt the same kind of anger. As a new Canadian, he thoroughly learned and adapted to Canadian power structures and institutional systems rooted in democracy. He was street smart, stood up for what he believed in and had a strong and embodied sense of his own value and the value of what he had built. For him, this was manifested in the incredible detail and deep knowledge he had on how the Canadian system worked. He used the system to peacefully stand up for himself, for what he believed was fair, for what he believed was just. Bottom line, he did not become a victim to injustice. By using the system within the system, he valiantly challenged it.

Kunimatsu took meticulous business records of his assets. He knew the power of information and its documentation, not just costs and revenues, but insurance for replacement costs, valuations, appraisals, landlord-tenant arrangements with notarized lease agreements, depreciation and so on. He understood what Canadian business, financial and legal structures were built on. He understood what citizenship was built upon.

In 1948, he and other Japanese Canadians sued the Canadian government in what was called the Bird Commission. These are extraordinary records of Japanese Canadian activism, of my grandfather's activism. They did not directly challenge the government for the confiscation of their properties and forced sale of their assets in and of itself. The claimants challenged the devaluation of their assets and the low compensation received for them. For my grandfather,

this was their house in Steveston, his four boats, his car and his biggest asset was his largest boat, the May S.

A 60-foot long seiner, the May S was confiscated by the Canadian navy on Feb. 15, 1942. The navy used it to round up smaller Japanese Canadian fishing boats for the “Japanese Fishing Vessels Disposal Committee.” The construction cost tallied up to a total of \$16,825.80. The replacement value, according to his insurance, was \$18,000. The insured value was \$11,000. But according to the Canadian navy that took it over, the value was \$10,500. The government appraised value in 1942 was \$8,750. Kunimatsu received even less: just \$8,057.50.

In the end, the commission conceded he hadn’t received enough money. But the money wasn’t the point. These Japanese Canadians, knowing their value and the value of their assets and standing up for them, affirmed their own value, whatever the outcome. My grandfather did not become a victim to his victimizers, although the attempt was administratively vicious. Although heartbreaking and, I’m sure, oh so tempting, he did not give up. His dignity shone through the details on the page by using the rules of his victimizers to expose their moral bankruptcy.

Kunimatsu chose to follow a path of activism, not through destruction, but by living the solid principles of citizenship, community leadership, building and living by the values of humanity, justice and entrepreneurship. Case file 9609. That’s Kunimatsu Saimoto, my grandfather.

Laura Saimoto lives in New Westminster, B.C. On Sept. 26, the Nikkei National Museum in Burnaby, B.C., launches an exhibit on the dispossession of Japanese Canadians.

© Copyright 2021 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher