

Uraga, Japan: August, 1946
The Making of a "Re-pat" [Kika Nisei]
by Kaye Kishibe

Earlier this year in March, as I watched on television the images of the cities (Kamaishi, Rikuzen, Takata, Sendai) from the Tohoku region, which suffered the great earthquake and tsunami, my mind went back to August, 1946, when I saw Japan for the first time.

Tokyo Railway Station was surrounded by destroyed buildings. "Nothing was standing." This oft-used expression was not an exaggeration in this case. It conveyed exactly what we all saw. Only the skeletons of concrete buildings were left standing, spreading before us was a wide field of nothing.

In March, the images of physical damage were similar to what I remember from 1946. However, it was not these images that took my mind back sixty-five years. It was the evacuation centres. In school gymnasias, community centres, and make-shift areas in athletic arenas, I saw families huddled together in groups with their bundles of possessions. The four or five people who formed these clusters sat on blankets using sheets as dividers for precious privacy.

For a moment Hastings Park 1942 flashed through my mind, overlaying the scene on the television screen like a photograph in double exposure. But quickly that gave way and returned to the memories of Uraga in 1946.

I was left with the problem of how to begin this story. It seems that each event needs the one that preceded it for full explanation. But is one's entire life story necessary to explain a small part of it? I found myself musing - shall I start with the time my family was leaving the converted American troop ship, **GENERAL M.C MEIGS**? Or shall I begin by talking about the two-week voyage across the Pacific Ocean? Or of my surprise at seeing a modern city, when the bus carrying us entered Vancouver? Or before we set out to Vancouver, we were in Tashme. That may do as a starting point. I shall begin with the last day in Tashme.

It was a sunny day I recall, when my family got into the bus. It was standing somewhere not far from the barn where I was able to see the group of cedar trees. Behind the trees, the second shack on Second Avenue was our home for the last year. We had spent most of the war years in New Denver and moved to Tashme when we decided to go to Japan after the war ended.

In the bus was my family. Father, mother, twelve-year old Ko, two-year old Kenzo and myself. I was eight years old. Our grandparents who were with us from the beginning of internment in Hastings Park had left on an earlier ship to Japan. Outside, there was a large crowd. People were milling about, saying good-byes to friends and relatives. Not a one believed that they would see each other again. Somehow the emotion of the occasion did not register with me. I was perhaps too young. I was told much later, that the loud speaker was playing "Auld Lange Syne". I do not remember.

I do remember one incident, however. As I sat in my seat, a boy who was a classmate of my older brother came into the bus, and whispered a girl's name into my ear. "Tell that to Ko," he said, and quickly left. I dutifully told my brother. An annoyed expression appeared on his face

and we both looked out the window. There on the road we saw the boy waving his hand at us with a pleased look on his face.

The bus began to move out of the little community which was the centre of my life for almost a year. The evergreen grove which hid the community office, the newer building that was the grocery store where I went shopping with my mother using coupons instead of money, and the field with rail-fences where Jimmy found a dead man's body. On the other side was the barn where highschool classes were held. Behind the barn was the cliff. That spring, the side of the cliff collapsed as water coming from somewhere deep within the mountain burst forward in a gushing waterfall.

This region of British Columbia is prone to landslides. Recently, news reported a major landslide occurred near Hope, B.C. and caused the highway to be closed down. When I visited the site of Tashme on a tour of the "Ghost Towns" in 2002, the landslide had changed the scene completely. The two rivers were gone and there were no signs of the baseball field or sawmill beside the swamp.

As I sat with my family in the bus and traced the gravel road along the field, I remembered how my grandfather¹ walked down this path often with Mr. Nagao². "Meestah Nakamura" Mr. Nagao would say at the door. He was an impressive figure with long white beard and a cane. The two old men would then walk side by side talking. They would have had a lot to talk about the past. My grandfather was an advisor to the Canadian Japanese Association, *Nihonjin kai*, for a long time. He and Mr. Nagano had advised the Association during the First World War when a unit of Japanese Canadian volunteers was raised from the community. A few years before that, Mr. Nagano had a remarkable part in the aftermath of the 1907 Anti-Oriental Riots. He was the interpreter during the investigation by the federal commission led by none other than the young William Lyon McKenzie King.

As the bus drove into Vancouver, my first impression was that it was an unreal city. After seeing only dirt roads since the age of three, the neatly paved streets were like something out of picture books. When I saw the lines of white and yellow painted on which people and cars passed by, my surprise was hard to contain. "Look, look," I said, pointing to the lines, "the road is painted."

Mom, Ko and I were born in Vancouver. Dad had come from Japan as a boy of barely seventeen. He was pulled out of middle school by his father who owned a fishing boat in Terra Nova, B.C. He needed a pair of hands to help him. Dad and Mom were married in 1934 and raised a family on Alexander Street. Everyone on the bus had memories of Vancouver, yet as they looked out on this city, no one uttered a single word as we raced to the pier.

Whenever I think of those times, I smell tomato soup. It seemed that wherever we went, we were given tomato soup. It was as if the unmistakable strong smell followed us around. When we reached Pier One, we were herded into a factory-like building³. We lined up for food surrounded by that smell.

¹ Nakamura, Tatsuki

² Nagao, Tadaichi

³ This must have been the Immigration Building seen on a photo on page 172 of *Spirit of the Nikkei Fleet*.

The next memory is that of the family walking down the wharf. Dad was carrying baby Ken and I took my mother's hand. Ko was probably carrying something – making himself useful as the eldest son should. We saw the side of the ship that was to take us to Japan.

On the front side where the huge anchor poked out of a hole, was the name, "*GENERAL M.C. MEIGS*". Dad said it was a large ship, 20,000 tons. It was the same class as the *HIKAWA MARU*, a Japanese passenger ship that used to cross the Pacific regularly. Uncle Sally, mother's brother sailed on the *HIKAWA MARU* to Japan in 1940. Many Japanese Canadians have memories of this ship that miraculously survived the Second World War as a Red Cross hospital ship. Eight years later, it was to bring three boys and a widowed mother back to Canada.

However, on the way to Japan, the *GENERAL M.C. MEIGS* had no romance for us. It was a drab looking converted American troop ship, which it was said, "would have been used for the final assault on Japan had the war continued". We were assigned quarters three or four decks below, one bunk bed for each of us. In this way began the fourteen day voyage across the Pacific Ocean. The official word "repatriation" was applied to the family. It was only Dad who was returning home and that after thirty years.

On the ship, the family lived in full view of others. This did not bother us, however, since this was also true for everyone else. When we set sail, the greatest problem was sea-sickness that overwhelmed every member of our family except Dad. To make things worse, during the middle of the voyage, the crew began painting the deck. The smell of paint added to our motion sickness nausea.

Motion sickness ran in our family. The earliest memory I have of Vancouver was being taken by Mom on the street-car from the Powell Street area where we lived to Marpole where Mom's sister, Aunt Sue, lived. This ride was excruciating for me. I would be so sick by the time we reached Marpole, I wished the earth would stop so that I could just get off. Then, all too soon, I had to be ready for the trip home.

As I child, I could never be on the swing too long. Just watching the other children on the swing would induce motion-sickness for me. Now, on the way to Japan, we were trapped on the *GENERAL M.C. MEIGS* with no means of conveniently getting off.

The Pacific Ocean in August of 1946 was unusually calm, according to the men on the ship. Though there were some rough spots when the wind tossed the ship and we could hear dishes sliding down the tables of the cafeteria and landing on the floor. I have no recollection of eating anything (although it is impossible that I could have survived without eating during the two week voyage). I managed to sneak up to the deck a few times though, to watch the flying fish forming a spray from the sides of the ship. The seagulls were a common sight as well. They were very white with yellow beaks and eyes as if somebody painted them with a brush. It reminded me of the bright colours on the streets of Vancouver. So clean, so neat, and so unnatural.

One thing I often did do, as I lay in my bunk bed was to look at the autograph book I carried. I have it with me, even today. When in Tashme, as the trip to Japan came near, every one of our friends had an autograph book. In mine, I have the notes of teachers, classmates, friends in the neighbourhood, relatives and adults we knew. Some were illustrated with pictures.

On the first page is the autograph of Uncle Carr, who married Aunt Sue. He had come all the way from Slocan to Tashme in January to stay with us for a few days. It read:

Tashme, B.C.

Jan. 8, 1946

My dear nephew

*Ko-chan is your older brother. Obey him, and you
won't regret it.*

Your uncle

Kaoru Carr Suzuki

This, I suspect, was written after Uncle Carr had witnessed a tiff between me and Ko. As a second child, I always felt the need to assert myself in those days.

After many years, I learned the purpose of Uncle Carr's visit. Dad and grandfather had signed the papers to return to Japan after the war. We were living in New Denver then and the war had not yet ended. When the extent of the devastation in Japan became known, various organizations persuaded the government to allow people like Dad to change their minds. Uncle Carr came to Tashme to persuade my grandfather and Dad to rescind their signature and stay in Canada. Whatever discussions they had, they had them without me around. In the end, Uncle Carr could not convince them and returned to Slocan.

I have no clear memory of crossing the International Dateline. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I have vague images of adults talking about this and making a fuss about losing or gaining a day. There is a point, however, when one knows one is at the middle of the ocean. There are a few days when seagulls are not seen. It is in the corridor too far from Canadian shores for seagulls and yet too far from Japan for Japanese birds. Perhaps I had only imagined it, but it was during this time that one heard more talk about Japan among the passengers. What are we to face when we land? Very few, if any, knew. Here is a passage from a book⁴, published by the Asahi Shimbun in 1960, looking back on 1946 in Japan. [Translation by the author]

If one were to be asked what was happening during this year, many might now have difficulty remembering. This was the year when everybody was desperately living from day to day, escaping hunger and the continuing rise of inflation.

New Years Day was bleak. "Kaidashi", city folks heading to villages to buy food from farmers filled the cold railway stations. Often, the only way into the train was to break the windows of the cars. In one case, the crowd broke in to the mail train. Undelivered postcards were scattered into the wind through the broken windows.

Foreigners (dai sankokujin: Koreans residing in Japan) showed their arrogant attitude on the streets. It was "pay back" time for the long discriminated. They beat Japanese while the officials looked on. Crowds of Japanese looked the other way. Some were showing tears of anger and frustration.

⁴ Album, Fifteen Years After the War, a History. *Arubamu sengo 15nennshi, Asahi Shinbumshya, 1960.*

The pine trees of "Yoyogi no Hara" (Yoyogi Park) Tokyo, were cut down one after another. In Osaka, the timber bricks that lined the street were dug up and stolen – people needed fuel.

At Ueno Zoo, elephants, lions, panthers, and bears were killed a long time ago. Seals and sea lions died of hunger, the pelicans died on New Years Day and the following day. An emaciated pig was found in the lions' den.

Armed robbery and muggings increased. On New Year's, a gang of seven was arrested. They were former members of Kamikaze suicide squadron. They broke into a farm house in Kasagi and stole a sack and a half of white rice and a litre of rice that was for mochi.

A woman returning from overseas wrote to a newspaper: "I am dying of hunger. At least give my children rice porridge to fill their stomachs". In a column on New Years Day, the following appeared in the Asahi Shimbun. "Was there such a pitiful New Years Day since the beginning of this nation?" On this New Years Day, the emperor renounced his divine status.

As shown by the "Food May Day", 1946 was the worst year. The only activity on schedule was the American policies for laying the foundation for democratization. A prominent writer is said to have mused: "Better to have Japan declared a state of the U.S.A.".

When I recall such moments in my life, of all the peoples of the world who have chosen their unique deities, I salute the First Nations people for their choice of the Raven, a trickster in black. I imagine it perched on a high tree looking down with head cocked saying: "*If you only knew.*"

On that day, our ship anchored off the shore of Uraga. The families lined up with their possessions and boarded barges which took them ashore. There was nothing unusual in the scenery at first sight. The landscape was that of any coast that can be seen in Canada. We saw nothing uniquely Japanese in the low mountains or the sandy beach. During the few days before landing, there was excited talk among adults whether we will have a chance to see Mt. Fuji. We did not and I did not hear that anyone else did. Someone explained that the ship followed the route taken by Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853, landing at the entrance of Tokyo Bay just about where we were. It was Perry's presence at Uraga that set off a string of events that led to the building of modern Japan.

Uraga or Kurihama, we referred to the place in both ways while we were there. The first impression was the white sand beach with that unmistakable smell of the sea. After four and a half years in the interior of British Columbia, I had forgotten it. The smell of Uraga was not at all like that of Slocan Lake. Neither did it smell like the wharf on wooden piles near our home in Vancouver where, as a young child, I was taken to catch shiners, which the Japanese called *shaina pochi*. This was a special smell of salt breeze mingled with that of seaweed. It was to become the smell of Japan for me for the future.

We were *hikiageshya*, or returnees, and were placed in a large one-story building. It had been accommodating evacuees from lands that were no longer part of the Japanese Empire that had now shrunk to the four main islands. We were an exception coming from North America. The

entire building formed a single hall with *tatami* and very few pillars. There, the families settled in their own areas marked out by possessions. There was no privacy – not even sheets or blankets to curtain off a spot. Everyone understood the stay there would be temporary.

As boys ranging from twelve- to seven- or eight-year olds, we explored the surroundings. There were hundreds of crabs, two or three inches across. They were found everywhere, especially where small creeks, no more than a foot in width, flowed out to the sea. These crabs were brightly coloured red or orange. The place did seem different from Canada. As we explored further, we came across a prize. Nestled in a stand of trees, there was an abandoned Japanese fighter plane. From its snub-nosed radial engine and the wings with rounded tips, we decided that it was a “Zero”.

Ko, who was a studious twelve-year old and a book worm, had a different opinion. All the other boys were satisfied that the plane was the famous “Zero” fighter plane. Ko shook his head and pointed to the rear end of the fuselage under the tail fin. He explained that the characteristic cone was missing. “If it were a Zero”, he said, “the body should end in a sharp point. I think it’s an ‘Oscar’, Nakajima K-43”. Calling it a “Zero” was good enough for the rest of us.

The boys soon lined up to take a seat in the cockpit. When my turn came, I sat in the pilot’s seat that had been stripped of its padding. The foot pedals were working and so was the joy-stick. It was easy to imagine myself flying as I pushed the joy-stick from side to side, the flaps of the wings moved up and down. The control cables were still working – a forward thrust made the elevators move.

It was a surprise how small fighter planes were in those days. It is a wonder how the pilots crammed into the small cockpit and flew thousands of miles over the sea. I made the usual airplane sounds with my throat and imagined I was flying. But soon it was someone else’s turn and I had to climb out of the plane.

This evacuation centre had housed other returnees from other parts of the world. The staff arranged entertainments for these refugees. My older brother went to one of these shows and came back with a joke. “What is a sleeping pig that has to do with a train?” The answer: “A tunnel.” Explanation: “pork” is *ton*⁵, “sleep” is *neru*; together it became *ton neru* – Japanese for tunnel. A corny joke, probably dreamed up by amateur entertainers volunteering to cheer the unfortunates.

In the evacuation centre, with no partitions between the families, we were able to observe the many goings-on that normally would have eluded neighbours. One man throughout the trip carried a large radio carefully with him. It was always by his side. It must have been a treasure, this radio with a wooden console designed for a parlour. During the internment, no one was allowed to have radios or camera, so there must have been a story behind his precious possession. Then the moment came, when, with the eyes of the entire crowd on him, the man pulled out the long chord and reached for the light hanging from the ceiling. He removed the light bulb and screwed in the socket he carried in his pocket. He flipped the switch – nothing happened. Then embarrassing minutes passed as he fumbled around with the dials and wires. The radio did not come on.

⁵ As in *Tonkatsu*, breaded pork

People began to make contact with their relatives and some families appeared to find this easier to do than others. As time went by, the place began to thin out as families moved out escorted by relatives and friends.

Our friends from Vancouver days, Margaret, Peter, Eddie, and Masa were among the earlier ones. Their parents' home was in the countryside of Shiga-ken. We did say our good-byes – somehow I have no recollection of the scene. The boys had been playmates of my brother and me throughout the internment. We were together in New Denver. When we moved to Tashme, they did too. On the few days when we were relatively free of sea sickness, we would talk and play on the deck.

During the war, their father was in Angler, Ontario. Their poor mother struggled through those years raising four children in the camps. As we were leaving Tashme, their father joined them. I remember being introduced to him. I had never seen the family so happy, so excited to be together again. Masa, the youngest, was so proud to show-off his father to us. Now, after saying goodbye in Uraga, I was not to see them again until we were adults.

Among us were two boys our age whose mother was Norwegian. Although mixed marriages were very rare in those days, she was so outgoing and friendly, it did not register to us that there was something to notice. One day, the family was gone. Wherever they had settled, they would have found that Japanese are different from Japanese Canadians. Even our family had to endure being called "Americans" and looked upon as "foreign". After eight years in Japan, this still remained true at some level, even with the closest of friends.

Finally, the time had come for us to leave. Dad had made contact with his younger brother, Koji, in Hakodate, Hokkaido. I don't remember how long we were in Uraga. But in the few weeks we were there, our lives had changed. More importantly, we ourselves were changing, including myself, as I was to find, who was changing profoundly.

When we first came to this evacuation centre, the staff came with large bundles of white cloth-like sheets. They left these bundles open in strategic places in the hall and told the children to help themselves. As the bundles were opened, there in front of us were what appeared to be piles of chocolate cookies.

We children rushed to pick them up. But as soon as we tasted them, we could not help but spit them out. We were not grown up enough to care for the feelings of the staff. It was an instinctive reaction. What we expected to be sweet chocolate cookies were tasteless biscuits made of soy meal. Today, it would be hailed as a nutritiously sound solution to child obesity. Indeed, this staple must have sustained Japanese soldiers and civilians as supplementary food in emergencies during the war. But for us, used to what we enjoyed as children in Canada – pop, candies, and chocolates – this was not food. Mom said afterwards how shocked the staff was with our reaction. They said to her that other *hikiageshya* children would rush and eat the biscuits as if they were starving. "Kids from Canada are different".

It did not remain this way for long. A few weeks later, we children were waiting for these biscuits to be brought in. We would rush to the opened bundles like any other *hikiageshya* children and devour the extra food. The poor quality of food we were served daily was

beginning to have an effect. The staff was doing its best, but I was soon to discover, this was a land on the verge of famine.

At last it was time for my family to leave. Except for us five, there was only one other person going to Hokkaido. He was a young man, perhaps in his thirties, with an interesting past. According to what Dad was told, he was one of those people living on the fringes of society, hopping on railroad cars. Even during internment, he would suddenly be seized by *wanderlust* and take off, so to speak. He was known to the Mounties, who regularly brought him back – sometimes, the story went, from as far away as Texas. Since he was from Nanae, a village not far from Hakodate, we named him “*Nanae no an’chan*” – brother from Nanae.

I always thought that men who jumped box-cars were tough guys who fought with their fists. This is what we saw in the cowboy movies. But “*Nanae no an’chan*” was nothing like this. He was a gentle, soft sort of man. He seemed to be glad he could tag along with us. Mom was a little anxious and told us not to become too close to him. But he was so unusual, so charming and open, my older brother and I found him a good companion on the train.

It was a long train ride to Aomori city where we boarded a ferry that took us across the Tsugaru Strait to Hakodate. I remember very little of this trip except for the crowdedness everywhere. I stayed close to my family as “*Nanae no an’chan*” entertained us with his stories.

The train was crowded as I had never seen before. We managed to have seats since we were on the train from the beginning. But those who came on had to squeeze themselves in the aisles. I did not realize at the time, but looking at pictures from the time, the travelers were mostly shabbily dressed men. Some were still in military uniforms with badges and ribbons removed. With the crowded conditions, I still wonder how we managed going to the toilet.

There was only one vivid memory of the train trip. That was the sight of Tokyo Station and the surroundings. It was flat. Flat enough for me to associate it with the shining Fraser River and the Pacific Ocean. Born in Vancouver and having spent all my life in the mountains of Kootenay valley, flatness extending from horizon to horizon was a surprise. But the flatness of the sea of rubble was painful even for me, a child of eight who had never seen Tokyo as a thriving city.

Those few days at Uraga were a pivotal point in my life. I was to stay in Japan for eight years, so it was a hinge that joined two phases of my life: eight years in Canada, eight years in Japan.

As I watched the devastation of the Tohoku Earthquake/Tsunami and the scenes in the many evacuation centres, the memories flooded my mind. Now, after all these decades, I rarely thought of that time in Uraga. But I did experience such a moment when I was travelling in Tokyo in 1991, a full 45 years later.

With a day to spare, I surprised myself with this urge to go and see Uraga. On the map it showed that it was a short stop from Kamakura so I took the electric train and found that it was not difficult to find.

It was a quiet place. There was a white sand beach that extended quite a distance. I walked toward the sea. There was nothing there however, that reminded me of the place we stayed. On

the beach was a food cart minded by young people, summer students, I thought. They were not busy since hardly anybody was around.

I walked to the waters and tried to orient myself. Seeing the distant skyline, I said to myself, “that must be Yokosuka, so this should be the place.” But there was no marker. As I walked along the shore, I came upon a monument to Commodore Perry. But there were no rivulets where we found those small colourful crabs, the seaweeds washed on the shore, or the trees where the abandoned warplane was hidden.

There were also no buildings. When I talked to people at the hotel about Uraga or Kurihama, the staff told me that it is now a site of the Naval Self-Defence Force. I looked around and did not see anything like it. Having lived close to Hakodate’s large docks, I know what naval installations look like. This was not it.

I was almost frantic. Have I travelled all this way only to go home without seeing Uraga? I walked away from the beach to the road. The road became hilly. I was soon surrounded by buildings with concrete walls. They looked forbidding and some had signs “No Entrance”. This complex of buildings, I concluded was the naval site. I walked down toward the beach. I had given up hope of identifying the place where we stayed in 1946.

I saw an old lady was walking toward me. Our eyes met and she smiled. I talked to her and explained what I was looking for. She became very animated and waved toward the beach where the food cart stood. I was right, that spot is where the building stood.

She said that her father owned the land around here. During the war, the Imperial Navy bought the land from her father to build a dormitory for high school girls who were “volunteered” to work for the navy. It was logical, since this was so close to the Naval Base in Yokosuka.

It was this dormitory that was used for housing the *hikiageshya*. Now I was at least sure that I had identified the actual place, however, without the precision I anticipated when I started out.

I thanked the lady, bowing as deeply and frequently as a grateful foreigner can, and went back to the beach. I bought fried noodles and sat on a bench overlooking the area. I remembered a phrase from the classical Chinese poem I once had had to memorize in my *kanbun* class.

saisai nennen hana ainitari;
nennen saisai, hito onajikarazu.
[As years pass, nature remains,
but people are not the same.]⁶

Only in this case, it is nature that was completely obliterated. Not a single physical sign remained.

I still meet people who were on the **S.S. GENERAL M.C. MEIGS** with me on that voyage. I am sure the event at Uraga of August 1946 was a pivotal experience for them as it was for me. The

⁶ Literally, “Year after year, flowers resemble one another, year after year, people are not the same.”

memories of that time, in reversal of the poem, must still remain as flowers in their minds. But it will be a matter of time, when even these living memories will also be lost.

Author's note:

The historical background to this piece can be found in that wonderful book recently published: *The Spirit of the Nikkei Fleet* by Masako Fukawa.* Especially pages 170-177.

*Fukawa, Masako. *Spirit of the Nikkei Fleet: BC's Japanese Canadian Fishermen*, by Masako Fukawa with Stanley Fukawa and the Nikkei Fishermen's History Book Committee. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C., 2009.