

JAPANESE CANADIAN HISTORY IN A NUTSHELL

People of Japanese heritage have a long history in Canada. During the late 19th century and into the 20th century, many people came from Japan to work in industries such as fishing, mining, logging, and farming. Japanese communities existed in various places on the west coast of British Columbia and on Vancouver Island, with the largest community centred around Vancouver's Powell Street on the east side of the city.

On December 7, 1941, Japan launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, in the United States. The United States declared war on Japan, and Canada followed suit. In Canada, concerns were raised that the Japanese Canadian population living near the coast would spy on or sabotage Canadian military and security measures for the Japanese. However, experts in the military and the RCMP did not believe that Japanese Canadians posed any threat to safety or security. Despite this, the Canadian government responded to the public's racism, and ordered all "persons of Japanese racial origin" to be removed from the "restricted zone", within 100 miles of the west coast of British Columbia.

Almost 22 000 people were affected by this order. Most of them were Canadian citizens, and more than half of them were born in Canada. Most of the Japanese nationals had been living in Canada for over twenty five years. Men, women, and children were forced to leave their homes, many with only two days' notice or less to prepare. With severe restrictions on luggage, they left behind not only significant assets such as homes, cars, and boats, but also treasured heirlooms and many other precious possessions. These were later sold by the government without the owners' consent.

The largest number of Japanese Canadians were sent to hastily built camps in the BC interior, where they lived in tiny, crowded shacks with no insulation. This is often called the internment. Men aged 18-45 were forced to leave their families to work in road camps, or, if they protested this, were sent to prisoner of war camps. Some families, in order to stay together, went to sugar beet farms on the prairies, where they worked very long hours and lived in poor conditions for almost no pay, or went to other provinces.

In 1945, Japan surrendered, and the second world war ended. But even though no one could argue they were still a security threat, Japanese Canadians were still not allowed to return to the coast. Instead, they were told

to either move east of the Rocky Mountains (outside of BC) to show cooperation for the government's policy of forced dispersal for Japanese Canadians, or go to Japan. Around 4000 people went to Japan, over half for the first time. The others still had to find a way to start their lives over again for the second time since 1942. It wasn't until 1949 that Japanese Canadians were finally allowed to return to the coast, and given the same rights as other Canadian citizens, such as the right to vote.

In the 1980s, people in the Japanese Canadian community started to organize, and lobby the government to apologize for their actions against Japanese Canadians from 1942-1949. This movement is known as the fight for redress.

On September 22, 1988, the Government of Canada signed an agreement with the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC). The government formally acknowledged their unjust treatment of the Japanese Canadian community in the 1940s, and as compensation, awarded \$21,000 to every surviving Japanese Canadian who had been affected by the unjust policies of forced dispersal and dispossession, as well as a \$12 million community fund to the NAJC. This money funded many initiatives, including the building of cultural centres and seniors' homes, as well as supporting arts and culture projects across Canada.

RECOMMENDED READING

Taiken: Japanese Canadians since 1877

Published by the Nikkei National Museum, *Taiken* is also on display on the walls of the second floor of Nikkei Centre. It provides a more detailed overview of the history of Japanese Canadians with many historical photographs.

Redress by Roy Miki

Roy Miki, an award-winning Canadian poet and retired professor of English at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, was also an active member of the Redress movement in the 1980s. Although this book is called *Redress*, it includes history of Japanese Canadians from the earliest immigrants in the 19th century, until the signing of the agreement in 1988. Miki also includes stories about his own family's experiences, as well as an insider's perspective on the long struggle for redress.

Miki is an engaging writer, and this book is a highly informative history of Japanese Canadians, with a particular focus on the actions leading to redress in the 1980s.

***This is My Own* by Muriel Kitagawa**

Muriel Kitagawa was a Japanese Canadian Nisei (Canadian-born) woman who was forced to leave Vancouver in 1942 along with her husband and four young children. *This is My Own* is a collection of her writing, mostly from the period of uncertainty leading up to her departure from Vancouver. It consists chiefly of letters to her brother, Wes Fujiwara, who was a medical student in Toronto at the time, but also includes other pieces of her writing, such as articles she wrote for the Japanese Canadian community newspaper, *The New Canadian*. Kitagawa's letters show the injustice and confusion of the time, and she writes eloquently about her Canadian identity and to deplore the way her government is treating her community. An excellent inside account of the 1942 uprooting.

***The Enemy that Never Was* by Ken Adachi**

Published in 1976, this is the first comprehensive history of Japanese Canadians. Since it was written prior to the success of the redress movement, it feels dated at times, but Adachi had closer access to memories of the prewar and internment-period Japanese Canadian community than later historians, and his research and data have become indispensable to many researchers who came after him. This book is out of print, but is available to visitors of the Nikkei National Museum in the Charles H. Kadota Resource Centre.

***Stories of my People* by Roy Ito**

True to its title, a compilation of stories about different Japanese Canadian individuals, many of them known personally to the author Roy Ito, a Nisei who fought in World War II. Divided into sections based on each story's primary time period, the book contains personal recollections and accounts of important moments in Japanese Canadian history, and more offbeat stories of unique individuals or strange happenings in the community. This book is out of print, but is available to visitors of the Nikkei National Museum in the Charles H. Kadota Resource Centre.

MORE READING

HISTORY

- ▶ *Karizumai: A Guide To Japanese Canadian Internment Sites* - Nikkei National Museum
- ▶ *Justice In Our Time: The Japanese Canadian Redress Settlement* by Roy Miki and Cassandra Kobayashi

LITERATURE

- ▶ *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa (novel)
- ▶ *The Plum Tree* by Mitch Miyagawa (play)
- ▶ *Surrender* by Roy Miki (poetry)

MANGA

- ▶ *The Sword, The Medal and the Rosary* by Terry Watada, illustrated by Kenji Iwata

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS

- ▶ *Naomi's Road* by Joy Kogawa
- ▶ *When the Cherry Blossoms Fell* by Jennifer Maruno
- ▶ *Caged Eagles* by Eric Walters

FILMS

- ▶ *Sleeping Tigers: The Asahi Baseball Story*
- ▶ *Ohanashi: The Story of Our Elders* DVD series
- ▶ *Henry's Glasses*

WEBSITES

- ▶ Nikkei Stories - nikkeistories.com
- ▶ Tashme Historical Project - tashme.ca
- ▶ Hastings Park 1942 - hastingspark1942.ca