More Than a School

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Abstract

Today Canada is known as a country that supports multiculturalism, a national policy that attempts to promote respect for the unique cultures that immigrants bring with them when they make Canada their new homeland. This policy has gained international attention as it has been credited with maintaining a peaceful society despite 30 – 40 years of high levels of immigration. This has not always been the case. Prior to 1961, Canadian immigration policy was heavily slanted towards ensuring that a dominant Anglicized society prevail and visible minorities faced open discrimination. The Japanese-Canadian community, particularly between the years 1942 – 49, when they finally gained full-citizenship rights, experienced one of the most notorious, long-term examples of government-sponsored discrimination. However, by 1949 the Japanese-Canadian community was in danger of assimilating completely into the dominant Anglo-Canadian society and in response some members of the Japanese-Canadian community in Toronto founded the Toronto Japanese Language School (TJLS). After more than 60 years of educational service to Canadian society the TJLS stands as a reminder of an earlier, darker time in Canada’s history and also points to an ever more inclusive future.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Immigration, Discrimination, Citizenship, Inclusive

The Toronto Japanese Language School (TJLS) has been in existence since September 1949. Initially the students were from the local Japanese-Canadian community but for the last 30 years the student body has also included a great number of people with no Japanese ancestry. The teaching staff and volunteers that keep the school running are justifiably proud of this long continuing service to the community. All those who have supported the TJLS and continue to support it have an additional reason to feel proud. Beyond the educational role that the TJLS plays, the school’s existence is also a testament to the bravery of the post-war Japanese-Canadian community, a community that was almost legislated out of existence. The first part of this essay gives a brief introduction to the early, troubled history of the Japanese-Canadian community. The latter part of the essay argues that actions taken by some members of the community in Toronto in the early post-war years and which resulted in the foundation of the TJLS, resulted in the creation of a landmark in modern Canadian history, one that points the way to the more inclusive society that is characteristic of Canada today.

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The Early Years: The number of Japanese immigrants to Canada has never been large in comparison with other immigrant groups. The first Japanese immigrant, a man named Nagano, Manzo, arrived in New Westminster in the newly established province of British Columbia in 1877. Tally records of Japanese arrivals were not kept until 1896 and a record of actual immigrants, as opposed to those who landed in a British Columbia port and then moved on to the U.S.A., was begun in 1900. The national census of 1901 it shows that 4,957 Japanese immigrants were living in the Pacific Coast province of British Columbia. This was out of a total provincial population of 178,657, making the Japanese share of the total population just 2.5%. Over the next forty years the number of Japanese immigrants rose to a high of 22,205 in 1931 and the share of the total population (694,263 in 1931) reached 3.2%. In 1941 the Japanese immigrant population shrank slightly to 22,096 while B.C.’s total population increased to 817,861, making the Japanese share of the total population 2.7%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Japanese Immigrant Population in B.C.</th>
<th>Total Population in B.C.</th>
<th>% of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>22,096</td>
<td>817,861</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>22,205</td>
<td>694,263</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>15,006</td>
<td>524,582</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>8,587</td>
<td>392,480</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>4,597</td>
<td>178,657</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics Canada, Adachi

The early 20th century Canada that these first Japanese immigrants came to was very much culturally attached to its former colonial master, the British Empire. In fact, it was not until the Mackenzie King government passed the Canadian Citizenship Act in 1946 that the idea of Canadian citizenship legally existed. Up to 1946 all citizens of Canada were still called British Subjects, even though Canada had gained political independence from Britain 79 years earlier in 1867 with Confederation. British Columbia, the destination of almost all Japanese immigrants, lost its colonial status when it joined Canada in 1871. This lingering, extremely close relationship to Britain during Canada’s early post-Confederation years, lead the majority of the largely Anglo society to reject, socially or politically, immigrants who were not British, or who were not perceived to fit in with the Anglo-European status quo. An exclusionist policy was the basis of Canadian immigration until the early 1960s.

In fact, for most of its history, Canada’s immigration practices have been racist and exclusionary. Immigration policies immediately before and for many years after Confederation established a clear order of preference (rendered explicit, for example,
in the Canada Year Book, 1930) as to who would be allowed into the country. British
and American were the most preferred immigrants, followed by northern Europeans.
When labour was needed the doors widened to include central Europeans and, finally
southern and Eastern Europeans. The least preferred, and the target of racist
exclusionary policies, were immigrants of colour (Asians, blacks) and Jewish
immigrants. This order of preference remained remarkably stable throughout most of
the history of Canadian immigration policy; as a result, 90 per cent of all immigrants
who came to Canada before 1961 were from Britain. (Kelley, Trebilcock pp 466-67)

For Japanese immigrants this had a clear implication. Their culture and physical appearance marked them
as outsiders from the start and that is where they were kept socially, legally and politically. They became the
victims of institutionalized racism. As with the Chinese immigrants, who had begun immigration to Canada
even earlier than the Japanese and in greater numbers, they were not granted full citizenship rights until after
the end of WWII, 1947 for the Chinese-Canadians and 1948 for the Japanese-Canadians. Prior to these dates
neither group could vote in municipal elections, let alone provincial or federal elections. Therefore their
concerns were not presented to even the lowest level of government and they had no direct access to the
political machinery to improve their social status, which was, of course, the intention. Canadian society,
particularly in British Columbia, was clearly xenophobic. In Small City in a Big Valley, a history of Duncan,
a small town on Vancouver Island, Tom Henry captures the exclusionist thinking of the majority Anglo
residents towards the small Japanese community living besides them.

Perhaps because it was so adamantly pro-British, Duncan’s Caucasians in the
1930s tended to view local Japanese as individually admirable but collectively
reprehensible. P 134

The very qualities celebrated in the larger community – hard work, enterprise,
family stability – were seen as vices when displayed by Japanese residents. P 134

Combined with the belief that Anglo society was a superior society, there was a fear within the Anglo-
European community that Asian immigrants would come to Canada, particularly the province of British
Columbia, in ever-greater numbers and eventually overwhelm the Caucasian population. This was known as
the threat of the Yellow Peril. Needless to say, within this environment of racist paranoia, the stage was set
for the use of extreme and irrational force, and when Japan bombed the American naval base at Pearl
Harbour, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, action against all Japanese-Canadians was swift. Lead by the
Member of Parliament (MP), Ian Mackenzie, anti-Asian residents of British Columbia, who had long
demanded that the federal government oust Japanese and Chinese from the province, used Pearl Harbour to
support their arguments. Rumors spread quickly about suspicious activities in the Japanese-Canadian
community. Henry reports that in Duncan news quickly spread of a secret arms stash hidden by Japanese
loggers in caves in the nearby Koksilah Range. Men were sent out to investigate but found nothing, of course.
Also, it was said that a Mr. Aishoshi, who owned a shoe repair shop, communicated with the Japanese military with a secret radio transmitter (p. 135). Rumors were rife up and down the coast.

To eliminate the imaginary danger in their midst, it was soon decided to send the Japanese Canadian community at least one hundred miles from the coast so that they could not spy for the Japanese military. On December 8, 1941, action began with the government confiscation of over one thousand Japanese fishing boats. Three locally printed Japanese newspapers were also shut down. The War Measures Act was enacted, giving the federal government the right to withhold all civil liberties. On February 24, 1942 all Japanese Canadian males between the ages of 18 and 45 were forced out of the 100-mile wide coastal zone and on February 26, 1942 the mass evacuation of all Japanese Canadians began. By October 31, 1942 not a single Japanese Canadian remained within 100 miles of the coast. The community of almost 23,000 people, from babies to the elderly, had been moved to internment camps in the interior mountains, to road construction camps in even more remote locations further north, and to Prairie farms east of the Rocky Mountains (or, they were told they could return to Japan). All their possessions, apart from the few things they could take with them, were confiscated. On January 19, 1943, the federal cabinet extended to the Custodian of Enemy Alien Property the authority to sell off property belonging to the Japanese Canadian community without permission of the owners at prices far below their true market value. The money was then kept in non-interest paying accounts and the internees used the money to pay for their own internment.

As the end of the war approached in 1945 plans were made to release and resettle the internees. The province of British Columbia demanded that the 100 mile coastal zone remain Japanese-free (it was until April 1, 1949) and so the internees were ordered to move East or accept deportation to Japan, a country many of them had never even visited. Eventually 6,000 people were deported, and more surely would have followed, if it were not for public protests that forced the government to cease the deportations policy on January 24, 1947. In effect, the Japanese Canadian community, which had previously been concentrated on the coast of British Columbia, was dismantled. Based on registration numbers taken by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in January 1942 and post-war numbers taken in March 1949, it can be seen how the community became geographically divided. In January 1942, the Prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba) registered 664 Japanese; Eastern Canada (Ontario, Quebec, the Maritimes) registered 159, and British Columbia 21,957. In March 1949, the Prairie number increased to 5,650, Eastern Canada increased to 9,110 and British Columbia declined to 6,110 (Adachi).

First had come expulsion and incarceration, and then imposed impoverishment through the below market-value sale of personal property and finally, community fragmentation. The internment of the Japanese-
Canadian community, which first appears to have been a wild over-reaction to a wartime situation, was in fact also part of a campaign to ensure that a unified community would not re-emerge in the post-war period. It was a federally legislated solution to what was known as the “Japanese problem”. In the case of the Japanese community in the United States, there was internment but after release they were permitted to return to their homes along the coast immediately. The U.S. Japanese community could rebuild itself.

So the population of the community was reduced and then scattered and to ensure that the community would not rebuild itself any time soon, precautionary instructions were also issued to the Canadian Mission in Tokyo by the federal Canadian government. Until at least 1953, eight years after the conclusion of the Pacific War, the Canadian Liaison Mission was ordered to withhold assistance to those repatriated Japanese, even Canadian-born Japanese, who wished to return to Canada. Even those who had Canadian citizenship were refused help. The orders made a return to Canada extremely difficult by placing virtually insurmountable bureaucratic obstacles in the applicants’ path, as the following passage from a government document from 1947 makes clear.

Memorandum to the Cabinet Committee On Japanese Problems

Re: Questions of Consular protection and assistance in Japan for Canadian citizens of Japanese origin and re-entry into Canada of such persons and Japanese nationals retaining Canadian domicile.

Present Canadian Policy

At the sixth meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Japanese Problems held on January 10, 1947, there was some preliminary discussion of these difficult questions but, it was observed that no shipping would be available for some time to bring persons from Japan to this continent, no attempt was made to formulate firm recommendations. Accordingly, those matters remained largely governed by a memorandum of August 10, 1946 approved by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, which recognizes the right under existing law of Canadian citizens and Japanese nationals retaining Canadian domicile to re-enter Canada, but lays down that the Canadian Liaison Mission in Tokyo shall not for the present (a) help persons of Japanese race to obtain exit permits or buy passage, (b) issue visas to Japanese aliens even if they have technically retained Canadian domicile and (c) issue or renew passports to Canadian citizens of Japanese origin, except in special circumstances. It was expected that this memorandum would be reviewed in eight months to a year’s time. (Archives of the Toronto Chapter of the National Association of Japanese Canadians), italics authors’

This sort of strategic planning from the government, using a false narrative to push through a hidden agenda (using the hypothetical danger of Japanese-Canadians during wartime to justify the weakening and assimilation of the community) was, to say the least, Machiavellian. It can be added, that it was also, a largely successful strategy. After the conclusion of the war there was never again, a return to enclaves of
Japanese-Canadians. No large city in Canada ever again developed a Japantown. The community was permanently broken up and after so many years of severe hardship and racism many Japanese Canadians worked hard to assimilate into the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture. There were however some who still believed it was important to pass on the Japanese language-culture and identity to the younger generation by reestablishing a language school as soon as possible. In Toronto this was the goal of the determined members of the Toronto Buddhist Church. It was decided in 1948 to establish an Education committee and in 1949 the Toronto Japanese Language School (TJLS) was founded. The doors were opened in September of that year, making it the first Japanese language school in post-war Canada.

A New Beginning: In honour of its 40th anniversary in 1989, the TJLS published a commemorative book titled Ayumi. In English Ayumi means “walking”, “stepping”, or “steps”. It is a suitable metaphor for the TJLS as it has, since its inception, always remained in step with the needs of the community it serves, adapting, as the student body has evolved. During the first stage of the school’s life the emphasis was placed on passing on the Japanese language to the children of the issei (first generation) and nissei (second generation). Surrounded by the dominant English-Canadian culture the children were in danger of forgetting their community’s unique identity. It was vital for the community to ensure that they would not entirely forget Japanese.

In the 1960s, adult classes were also added as business ties with Japan increased. While the children’s classes remain the raison d’etre of the school, there are in fact more adult classes today because of a unique phenomenon that began in the 1980s and continues to the present. Japan’s great economic power and cultural and technological exports during this period have drawn ever-increasing attention from people around the world. Suddenly, anime, manga, Japanese food, fashion, J-pop, computer games and a myriad of other cultural exports can be found almost everywhere. The consumers of these products, the vast majority with no claim to Japanese ancestry, often develop a powerful interest in studying the language so that they can learn more about the country where all these unique and exciting things come from. It is a remarkable shift. In the immediate post-war years, the Japanese-Canadian community was called a “problem” and almost assimilated out of existence. Over 60 years later the TJLS, a school that was founded to counter the assimilation, thrives and generously passes on its knowledge to all, to the descendents of the first Japanese-Canadians, to the children of new Japanese immigrants and to other Canadians who wish to simply learn about Japan.

As of today, in 2013, about two hundred students are registered at the TJLS. There are 5 children’s classes and 8 adult classes, in levels ranging from beginner to high advanced. While most of the children have some family connection to the Japanese-Canadian community, remarkably, only about 20% of the students in the adult classes can claim a Japanese ancestor. This is a testament to the influence and importance of both
Japanese culture and the Japanese economy today. It is also a testament to the enormous social and demographic change that has taken place in Canada since the earlier days, when the only culture that really mattered was the Anglo-Canadian culture. Today, a great many Canadians would agree that, while not perfect, the country is more inclusive than it was. Finally, the continuing existence and success of the TJLS is, more than anything, a testament to the founders, teachers and students, to all of those people who would not let the Japanese community simply fade away and be forgotten in Canada. Those people who founded the TJLS and who supported it through the years may have not known it, but they were all pioneers in the truest sense of the word. By asserting the right of the Japanese language and culture to exist in Canada, decades before multiculturalism became an official policy of the Canadian federal government, they helped to blaze a new trail. They showed the nation that while they believed it was important to preserve their unique culture and identity they could also be Canadian citizens. They were brave, the way their ancestors were brave when they immigrated to Canada from Japan so many years ago, not knowing what the future would bring.

References


Memorandum to the Cabinet Committee on Japanese Problems. Federal Government Documents from the Archive of the Toronto Chapter of the National Association of Japanese Canadians.


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