

Recalling the bitter taste of racism - Tom Hawthorn



Tom Kuwabara and Yon Shimizu (right) in the fields of southern Ontario during the Second World War.

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Yoshio (Yon) Shimizu, 87, has enjoyed a long marriage, raised a fine daughter, finds satisfaction in retirement from a successful career in the faucet industry.

His health is good, though he has lost his eyesight and his memory is not as cracker-jack sharp as before. The resident of Wallaceburg, Ont., is at a stage of life when one wishes to complete unfinished business.

Mr. Shimizu belongs to the Class of '42 from Victoria High School in the city in which he was born. The yearbook includes a photograph in which he wears a dark suit and tie, his face stern and his jet black hair swept back from his forehead. He is hailed as “one of the brightest and most cheerful boys” in the class.

Yet, he did not get to graduate with his peers.

A top student, a basketball star and an all-round popular figure at school was ordered to leave the city. A school year that had begun with such optimism about future prospects ended abruptly.

In a few terrible weeks, Mr. Shimizu's plans and those of his fellow Japanese-Canadian classmates were forever altered.

Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and then Hong Kong 70 years ago this month. Then, in February, just three days after Mr. Shimizu's 18th birthday, the Canadian government imposed a sunset-to-sunrise curfew on all people of Japanese ancestry. They were to be forcibly removed from the West Coast.

“It was a shock what the government proposed to do with us,” Mr. Shimizu said.

“What could you do but accept it as the way the dice were rolled. There’s nothing you can do.”

His siblings and widowed mother were ordered to Vancouver, and from there, on to the internment camp at New Denver in the British Columbia Interior.

Mr. Shimizu, determined to graduate with his classmates, asked the school principal to help him extend his stay. Since the family’s home and the stock from their dry-goods business were seized, he got a neighbouring family to agree to take him in.

But the youth’s appeal was denied and he was ordered to report.

The attendance book in the school archives indicates his last half-day of studies occurred on April 23, 1942.

An assembly bade farewell to the school’s few Japanese-Canadian students, including among them Yasuo Hasegawa, known as Pete, an army cadet. The principal, Henry L. Smith, read a psalm. The students recited the Lord’s Prayer before filing quietly from the auditorium, some of them crying, passing through a door held open by young Mr. Shimizu.

The young man packed his possessions in an old army duffle bag, carefully folding the prized No. 8 singlet he wore as a forward on his basketball team.

He had not experienced much racism himself, but he worked as a newsboy selling the Victoria Daily Times on a downtown corner. He read the headlines.

“It was all the propaganda in the newspapers and the politicians yelling for us to be shipped out of Canada that would make you realize there were people who weren’t happy to have Japanese in the province,” he said.

For one brief week, he had been taken in by the Burnett family, British immigrants who lived around the corner from the Shimizu home. The father was a sawmill labourer, while the mother worked as a housekeeper. Their son, John, who also sold the Times, inherited the Shimizu route, as well as his prized corner of Yates and Government.

The family’s kindness was not well received by others.

“We got called Jap lovers and all that crap,” said John Burnett, 84, who now lives in Nanaimo.

Young Shimizu was ordered to Hastings Park in Vancouver where, as a young, single man, he was ordered to a work camp outside Schreiber, Ont., where he swept floors and kept the fires stoked inside a tar-paper shack serving as a kitchen. He was then transferred to a sugar-beet farm near Glencoe before being sent to a bush camp at Kapuskasing in November, 1942.

In 1943, he got permission to join a brother in Toronto, eventually completing his high-school education at Jarvis Collegiate. A skinny physique made the tree falling and sawing at the bush camp exhausting, while a job found for him at a plating company in Toronto was also too physically taxing. After the war, he returned to the classroom, studying chemical engineering and eventually gaining a degree in business administration. He retired in 1985 as a high-ranking manager with Waltec Industries (now Delta Faucets)..

Years passed before he would allow himself to return to Vancouver Island. When he first did so, he visited the Burnett family to offer his thanks. He also renewed acquaintances with Mary Hamilton, his old French teacher at Vic High, who had been the only member of the student body or faculty to write to him after he was forced from Victoria.

“You grow up with an inferiority complex because you grow up knowing you’re not the most popular race in the province,” he said. “Having a teacher being good to you is encouraging.”

Mr. Shimizu recently agreed to take part in a fundraising effort organized by the school’s alumni association. He has donated \$200 to sponsor a seat in the school’s 98-year-old auditorium, the same in which an assembly once bade him farewell with prayers and a psalm. The plaque on the seat includes his name, his would-be graduating year and the words, “remembering Miss Mary W. Hamilton.”

As well, the Class of ’12 is considering a suitable commemoration for those members of the Class of ’42 who were denied the triumph of a graduation ceremony – and so much more – seven decades ago.

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