



Perhaps it is time to ground this issue, to bring it closer to home, to examine the role of localities such as Victoria, where there was a small but vibrant Japanese-Canadian community that virtually disappeared, never to return. How did this happen?

The early measures taken against Japanese nationals after Pearl Harbor were in some ways not that different than the measures taken against Germans and Italians in Canada.

However, within 10 weeks, the federal government passed P.C. 1486 and anyone of Japanese heritage, regardless of birthplace or age, became an enemy alien. This never happened in the case of German-or Italian-Canadians. So why did it happen to the Japanese?

What happened in Victoria helps to answer this question.

As in other places, some voices here clamoured for the uprooting of Japanese-Canadians after Pearl Harbor. Yet there were also other voices, long forgotten that still beckon to be heard.

Charles Flick, for example, wrote to the Daily Colonist in early 1942 chastising the paper for printing unsubstantiated allegations of Japanese "fifth column" activity. A retired lieutenant colonel, he didn't hold back: "Our provincial police, too, should learn to hold the scales of justice evenly and not go out of their way to terrorize and threaten Japanese. Out of similar conduct, the German Gestapo was born."

Was Flick a voice in the wilderness? Hardly. Charles Birs wrote to the Victoria Daily Times: "Has this wave of degradation, this spiritual dry-rot that has engulfed the entire human race, so sapped the moral and intellectual fibre of our own nation that only the pratings of the coward and the knave can find echo in the columns of the press? I refer here to the criminal mouthing against our fellow Canadians of Japanese descent that fill the press since the outbreak of the Japanese war."

Victoria School Board trustee Margaret Christie reported to the board "that to date there have been no signs of anti-Japanese feelings in our schools. This is to the credit of our boys and girls and to the credit of the Japanese children, whose conduct is exemplary."

Another retired soldier wrote, stating: "Through the press the proposition to intern the whole Japanese population is being pressed on us of British Columbia. While no doubt we white 'native sons of British Columbia' are 'the people,' yet there are thousands born here with a darker skin but with just as good right to live and to make their living out of our waters and off our soil."

Yon Shimizu, in Grade 12 at Vic High at the time, also protested. Declining to leave with his parents, he asked the Vic High principal to find a way for him to complete his last few months of high school. To no avail.

Why were the voices of Yon Shimizu, Charles Fleck and others ignored? The actions of Victoria's city council help us answer that question.

On Feb. 13, Victoria city council passed a motion calling for the uprooting of "enemy aliens." This action was not taken because of pressure from citizens - in fact, the city had only received two letters on the issue before council passed its resolution.

Yet, the mayor and councillors felt strongly enough to send their resolution to the prime minister and to John Hart, the B.C. premier who also lobbied the cabinet. It also forwarded the resolution to all the other municipal councils in the province, asking them to pass similar resolutions. Vancouver city council followed suit two days later, as did many others.

Victoria city council subsequently telegraphed the prime minister on Feb. 24 asserting it was "highly dissatisfied over failure dominion authorities to take prompt and effective steps" and demanding "resignation [of the] responsible minister" for not acting quickly enough.

In other words, resistance to the uprooting both locally and in Ottawa had prompted the resurgence of a powerful, racist coalition centred in Victoria and Vancouver that was determined to use the politics of fear to get its own way.

And so prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, himself well known for his racist views, introduced P.C. 1486 and the regulations that authorized the uprooting. It did not stop there.

After the uprooting from the coast was decided, Victoria city council subsequently passed a resolution demanding the government prohibit the "sale or lease or rental of any farm land or other real estate to Japanese," anywhere in Canada. Resolutions such as this contributed to the eventual seizure and selling-off of all Japanese Canadian property and assets, a measure never adopted in the U.S.

Even in 1945, though the war was nearly over, Victoria city council then passed another resolution demanding "the repatriation [sic] to Japan after the War of all peoples of Japanese origin."

This was not war fear, but ethnic cleansing, and it nearly worked. Four thousand Japanese-Canadians were deported before the voices of justice cried out and forced the government to halt this Canadian version of ethnic cleansing.


Anti-racist voices, both in racialized and Euro-Canadian communities, had begun to change Canada in the 1930s. Japan's imperial war, however, gave old-line racists an opening and they forged a powerful coalition to temporarily gain the upper hand. Japanese-Canadians paid a terrible price. Those uprooted from Victoria never came back.

For too long, it has been left to Japanese-Canadians to remind us of this past, to let us learn from history. It is time that we of non-Japanese heritage, as individuals and as institutions, take responsibility for past actions and help future generations understand our history.

As we do so, we need to be upfront about the racist past. But we need not dwell on the darkness, but rather celebrate the voices of Yon Shimizu, Charles Flick, Charles Birs, Margaret Christie and all the others who, by their actions, showed us the way forward then and now.

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