

MESSAGE: A Ghost Town Tour

1 In June of 2013, Marly and I embarked on a Ghost Town Tour - a bus tour leaving from Lethbridge, AB and into the interior of British Columbia to see places where Canadians of Japanese descent were interned during the Second World War. Our trip would take us through towns like Slocan, New Denver and Kaslo. By the way, in this talk I will also sometimes use the abbreviation, CJ, meaning Canadians of Japanese descent. I also realize that this talk may stir some difficult memories for members of this congregation, but I believe that is an important subject to address.

2 But to make this tour make sense, I need to take a step way back to the early 1900s to trace how my family ended up in this area.

3 ~~2~~ My maternal grandfather, Yuhei Matsugu was a boat-builder and a carpenter. When they first came to Canada, he and his wife, Kuniye
4 lived in Alert Bay on Vancouver Island, but as their family grew they moved to Vancouver, and bought a house in the part of the city that was called Japan Town. In Japan Town, businesses flourished and a Japanese language school was established. The Methodist church ran missions there and many Japanese Canadians converted to
5 Christianity, my grandparents among them. Here is a picture of Powell St. United Church where my mother's family attended.

My father's family settled in New Westminister, at that time a suburb of Vancouver. My grandfather, Yusuke Kai was a cobbler, while my grandmother, Tami Kai was at home raising a family of 10 children, with my father, Isamu Sam as the oldest, born in 1919.

6 They were able to purchase this modest house, which still stands on 11th St. They attended Japanese language services at a New Westminister United Church.

7 With the outbreak of war between Canada and Japan, restrictions were placed on CJs. A curfew was imposed from dusk to dawn.

8 Cameras, radios, and firearms were confiscated, as were cars, fishing boats and houses, and turned over to the BC Securities Commission.

9 A protected area was established from the BC coast to 100 miles inland. All CJs in that area, about 15,000 people, were to be moved out.

10 Here is a copy of the letter my father received, telling him that in two days he was to report to be shipped off to a work camp. He was sent to a work camp near Schreiber, ON to help build the Trans-Canada highway.

11
12 CJs living outside Vancouver were brought to Hastings Park where they were housed in buildings of the Pacific National Exhibition - the men's dorm in the arena, and the family quarters in the terribly unsanitary conditions of the livestock barns.

13
14 In all these actions, no distinction was made between those who still held Japanese citizenship or the majority who were naturalized Canadians or born in Canada. There was even no exemption for CJ veterans who fought for Canada during the First World War. Of about 22,000 CJs living in BC before the war, over 12,000 ended up in the camps. It is widely acknowledged that racism, fuelled by wartime hysteria stirred up anti-Asian BC politicians led to all CJs being regarded as enemy aliens - even though the RCMP maintained that they did not present a threat to national security.

15 And so the Kai and Matsugu families prepared for the move to the interior of BC. They were allowed to take only whatever they could carry themselves. People left many of their possession in their homes, not only because they could not carry much, but because they were assured that they would be returning after the war. Through all of this, the community chose to cooperate with the authorities, and the few who dared to resist were quickly taken away to prisoner of war camps.

16 Those who lived in the camps we were to see, were shipped by train from Vancouver to Nelson. From there they were taken by truck, or put on a paddlewheel steamer to Kaslo.

17

The Ghost towns like New Denver and Kaslo were mining towns that had once prospered but had become mostly abandoned. However, many of the places where CJs were interned were hastily
18 constructed camps. Often uncured lumber was used to build the cabins, which soon resulted in a lot of extra ventilation between the warping boards - so tar paper was placed on the outside to keep out the wind, if not the cold.

The camp at our first stop was named after the nearby Lemon
19 Creek. Here is a picture of how Lemon Creek looked back in the early 1940s. This is what remains of the Lemon Creek camp today.
20 There is now only a historic plaque and bench at the site. However,
21 during the internment, a large United Church congregation flourished here.

Our next stop was the site of the Popoff camp. Again, nothing
22 remains of the camp, but a friendly farming family across the road
23 keeps this historic poster on hand. Here is a picture of the camp when it was active.

24 Popoff is where one of my uncles and his family were interned. This is my uncle Masayoshi, or Mush Arima. After a terrible time
25 living in Hastings Park, his family was sent to a tent city in Popoff. Here are pictures of one of these tents which is now in the museum
26 in New Denver. My Uncle Mush, 12 at the time, moved into a tent with his mother, two older sisters and older brother. His father had
27 died 4 years before in a sawmill accident. They spent over a month in the tent that fall before were able to move into a cabin at Bay
28 Farm. Others were not as fortunate.

I'm going to use my Uncle Mush's own words to tell the next part of his story... "During that same year my mom... had to be
29 hospitalized at the Slocan Clinic, [then] transferred to the New Denver Sanatorium... when her condition worsened we were summoned to New Denver. ...our mom passed away in August of 1944 at the age of 47, with 4 of us at her bedside. ...with an accurate diagnosis and proper hospital care, she may have survived.

The constant worrying about the family and the turmoil caused by the evacuation may have contributed to her early death.

30 Her funeral was held at the Buddhist Church in Bay Farm. Our family and many friends gathered in front of the church for the arrival of my Mom's body... The shock of seeing a wooden box carrying my mother - on the back of a pickup truck, was a sad and heartbreaking moment in my life. Even at my age, I somehow felt the indignity of that incident was not what my mother deserved.

With the family now without parents, the difficult ...role as head of the family fell on my eldest sister, Takako who was only 20 at the time. With our family now reduced to 4, our small cabin was partitioned ... to accommodate another family. A young couple with a recently born baby moved into the other part of the cabin..."

The strangest thing is that I knew nothing about all this until a few years ago when at 80 years old my uncle finally decided to share his story. But this is fairly common among that the Nisei. If they do speak of the internment at all, it's only about any good experiences that they had.

31 Our tour moved on to New Denver where a place called the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre has been set up by the community.

32 Here, 2 cabins from the internment years have been preserved and a museum houses many displays and artifacts from the interment.

33 This is where many of the pictures that I am using in this presentation are from.

34 Our next stop was in Kaslo. Here are some pictures of Kaslo - one as it was in ghost town days, and some taken during the tour. Kaslo

35 is a beautiful spot, and would be a wonderful place to visit if you

36 weren't being forced to live there, and the house you actually owned wasn't hundreds of miles away. In Kaslo, the former Langham Hotel

37 has now been transformed into a cultural centre and museum to remember those who were interned there. Many families stayed at the Langham and Kaslo hotels during the internment.

My father's family, being a large one, was given an abandoned house to move into. My mother's family was moved into the Kaslo hotel which has not survived to the present day.

38 For some 3 years, my mother, her younger sister Lorraine and their mother and father shared a 9 by 12 foot room in the Kaslo hotel, with the two girls sharing a straw mattress on top of their parent's bed - much like this room at the Langham that has been restored to the way it was back then. The fifteen families on their floor shared the two washrooms and had a single stove to prepare their meals. My mother's younger brother, Ken Matsugu stayed in a bunk house for boys. One older brother was sent to a road camp, 39 while her oldest brother and family volunteered to do the back-breaking work of sugar beet farming in Alberta.

In the Langham Centre there were many pictures displayed from the internment years. I was delighted to find this picture of my Aunt 40 Michi working as medical assistant at the clinic in Kaslo. I also took this picture of some people on a baseball team; it was only after I 41 showed this picture to my mother that we realized that my father was in it, the second person to the left of those in uniform from the famous Asahi baseball team. Now I mentioned before that my father was sent to a work camp in Ontario, so you might wonder why he is in this picture. That brings me to another story, which still has many loose ends. While in Kaslo, my grandfather Kai was taken ill and was in the Kaslo hospital. My father and his brothers made requests to come and visit him from Ontario. This letter was sent back to them, 42 saying that since their father's condition had not changed, their request was being denied. The letter is dated October 6th, 1942. Yusuke Kai died in Kaslo less than two weeks later at the age of 52.

My father showed up in Kaslo a few days after. To this day, no one 43 is sure how he got there. Apparently he left his work camp without permission after hearing of his father's death, and somehow made his way across the country. Once in Kaslo, he stayed in hiding to avoid arrest and could not even attend his father's funeral.

Eventually, things somehow got worked out and he was allowed to stay on in Kaslo. He had broken the rules, but it seems that the rules got bent a little and that compassion won out in the end. The details are sketchy because my father never spoke about this incident to anyone, not even my mother; in fact, I never once heard him speak of anything that happened to him during the wartime years.

That is a sad part of our family history, but I want to say that there were good things that happened in Kaslo as well. It's hard to
44 → imagine what it would have been like to have been a resident of Kaslo before 1942. Imagine being told that a thousand so-called enemy aliens were going to be moving into your town, basically doubling the population. And yet the CJs moving into Kaslo were met with at least tolerance, and often with friendship. Government
45 workers and RCMP also treated the internees with respect even though they were required to enforce unjust laws.

46 St. Andrew's United Church also welcomed the new arrivals -
47 here's a few pictures of the church. In the church there is this
48 historic plaque to commemorate the church's ministry with CJs in
49 Kaslo. Soon the church was bustling with a big Sunday School. The
50 teacher in this picture is Aya Higashi, a life-long friend of my mothers.

Many students who were high school graduates were recruited to
51 become elementary school teachers. Since no provision had been made for schools for children, the CJs took it on themselves to organize them. The teachers were quickly trained by Hide Hyodo, at that time one of only two certified CJ teachers in the province - seen
52 in this picture on the bottom right. In Kaslo, this abandoned store
53 was used as the school; here is that building as we saw it on the tour.
54 Among the teachers were my mother, Sumy Matsugu - here in the
55 middle, and Aya Higashi, who we managed to see while we were in
56 Kaslo.

57 CJ High school students were told that they could only complete their education by correspondence. However in Kaslo, the principal, Russ MacArthur bent the rules and allowed the internees to attend high school there, which enabled some of the students to later go on to university. Some of you might recognize Amy Tomita and Martha Onodera here. And another bending of the rules in Kaslo - after the war, all CJs were to leave Kaslo and resettle east of the Rockies - either that of face deportation or exile to Japan. However, Aya Higashi's mother was in the Kaslo sanatorium and could not be moved, so Aya was allowed to stay. She lived in Kaslo for the rest of her life, had a long career as a teacher, and was a beloved member of the community.

58 Our gospel reading today was about the transfiguration of Jesus. On the mountain, things changed - everything became special and holy. The disciples had a different experience of Jesus; they recognized his holiness in a new way. I would say that in Kaslo, a mountain transfiguration of sorts also happened. People who once saw each other as enemies, saw that not only are we one in Christ, but we are really only one human family.

60 As well, the people of the United Churches in those mountain camps and towns found their faith tempered in the crucible of the wartime years. Within the United Church, CJs found safe spaces and created loving communities that continued long after they were dispersed, becoming the foundation of Japanese Canadian United Churches in major centres across Canada. And so the mountains became a holy place, a place where faith grew and blossomed in spite of, or perhaps in part due to the troubled times the internees went through.

61 I cannot overemphasize the vital role that the United Church played in aiding the CJ community before, during and after the war. The United Church has been a steady friend and ally of the Japanese Canadian people. The Rev. Kosaburo Shimizu was based in Kaslo, but ended up caring for internees throughout the camps, and after the war, for internees who were then dispersed across Canada.

The United Church also sent missionaries who had returned from Japan, to help the internees, people such as Constance Chappell and Neta Sadler. Later, as CJs left the ghost towns and camps, United Church deaconesses and ministers assisted them in finding housing, employment and church connections in new cities.

When, after the war, the government proposed the wholesale deportation/exile of CJs to Japan, the United Church was one of the strong opposing voices.

62 And when it became obvious that most CJs could not feel comfortable in their local churches, it supported the formation of Japanese Canadian United Churches.

I know that the CJ community as a whole is grateful to the United Church and its commitment to justice, and so am I, as one who was raised in the Centennial Japanese United Church congregation in Toronto. I would even venture to say that we are fiercely proud of our United Church heritage. The Ghost Town tour helped me to understand how much I have been shaped by the experiences that my parents and my community endured. And I think it has helped me to understand a number of things:

1. why witnessing acts of prejudice and racism bothers me so much;
2. why I and many other CJs identified so strongly with the civil rights movement in the US in the 1960s.
3. why my parents taught me to never, ever, ever judge another person by outward appearances
4. why I love the UC of Canada.

The ghost town tour helped me to see all of this - to see where I have come from, and why I am the person I am today - and for this I am truly thankful.

64 I want to end this message with a hymn that has been a favourite of Japanese Christians for many years.

The hymn, "Yamaji koete" was written in 1903 by Japanese Christian and educator Sugao Nishimura - it is translated as either "I tread the mountain path" or "In lonely mountain ways".

I was introduced to this hymn by Hide Shimizu. The hymn speaks of God's presence and care no matter where we are, and seems particularly appropriate for today's talk about "mountain paths" and mountains being holy places. Although the melody is western in origin, its simple pentatonic nature has led to its adoption as being truly fitting for a Japanese hymn. Let us join in singing "In lonely mountain ways", #666 in Voices United.