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RESEARCH – NEW WESTMINSTER JAPANESE CANADIANS – LETTER

[1942] FOLDER NO. 1

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PLEASE RETAIN
ORIGINAL ORDER

VOICES FROM THE PAST

The following is the text of a letter sent in May of 1942 from remaining individuals in the New Westminster community to familes recently removed to the Kaslo detention camp. The letter was sent just before the writers themselves were dispersed and was mailed without any certainty that it would pass through the censorship of the British Columbia Security Commission. Mr. K. Okihiro, one of the authors of the letter, remarks:

> "Now and again I go over the letter, thinking of the people involved, the majority of whom have passed away in the intervening years. Reading it over each time, I can vividly hear their voices."

"Dear _____

As you may be well aware by this time, the moving of Japanese families and individuals from the New Westminster area has been completed. On May 11, 17 families, involving 69 individuals, were the first to leave; thereafter, on the 13th, 33 families (140 persons); on the 15th, 32 families (123 persons); on the 17th, 31 families (120 persons); and finally, on the 20th, 5 families (15 persons) followed. Altogether a total of 118 families (467 individuals) were involved in the movement. There are a few families left in the district, determined to remain in

their homes despite government orders. We have been informed by telephone or telegram by those who left before the 17th of their safe journey to, and arrival in, Kaslo.

Because the physical moving and relocation to Kaslo has been completed, should we say that our 'project' is over? We feel that, as a group, we have accomplished an important task, sharing every moment with each other. This feeling of togetherness we would like to extend to our fellow community members who were earlier sent away to the road camps. Their deep concern over their families has been fully appreciated by all of us left behind. We are grateful for having seen the relocation through safely, yet we cannot help feeling tremendously lonely here. Our town, the Japanese district of New Westminster, now looks like a ghost town and we just walk around aimlessly. We have now stepped into the unforeseen future, our fate completely in God's hands. With the kind of strength we acquired through unity and harmony, we must proceed on our journey, coping with each difficult situation as it arises. We are in the midst of a war in a country which regards and treats us as 'enemy aliens.' No doubt this is a time of crisis by which our genuine strength as a group can well be tested. Many of you, we recall, were so calm and composed going through the process of moving. That very attitude helped to convince us that we were doing something useful.

We will make a report herewith on the events that we have just gone through so far. We will try to do it in as much detail as we can. However, you can easily understand how restricted it

is going to be because of the circumstances we are in.

To implement the government decision to mass evacuate the Japanese, they chose Hastings Park as a temporary detention center. They decided that our families, women and children, should be moved to the safest place possible, outside the so-called defence zone established by the government. The very day that the newpaper, The Province, reported that all Japanese families in the Steveston area would be removed within a week to Hastings Park, our Nisei, 21 of them, were taken to the road camps. All of the men would be leaving sooner or later. How did we react to the situation? What action could we really take? In tears after saying goodbye to the Nisei, we were convinced that those of us left behind had to do something and we started to meet at one place or another.

Most of the men in the community who were Japanese nationals volunteered for internment in road camps, trusting thereby that in return for this voluntary offer, our families, Nisei and naturalized Issei men would be protected by the government and would be allowed to remain in New Westminster. No such exemption was realized and thus we were forced to do whatever we could to alleviate the situation. Some of us voluntarily formed an ad hoc group at the Nishijima's and decided to get in touch with the government agency, the B.C. Security Commission, first-hand.

From March 27 through 31, according to the Commission's orders, all the male aged Issei, naturalized Issei and Nisei were required to register with the government. This forced registration impelled us to get organized and deal with the

Commission directly. On March 28, an ad hoc committee named the New Westminster and District Japanese Housewives Association, comprised of five elected women, was formed. Immediately afterwards, this Committee approached the Security Commission. Very fortunately, the Committee was able to meet Austin Taylor, Chairman of the Commission, and got an agreement from him that from now on the Committee would function as the representative organ of the community. The Committee had a name and sanction from the government, yet in substance it had no organization at all. Born overnight out of emergency, the Committee became the central force for pursuing the task of the evacuation of some 400 individuals. As you can easily imagine, it was not easy for the Committee to establish a firm structure. These five women were main figurehead and worked with the men, the actual organizers of the project. We had no choice but to carry on this way. Now that the evacuation is almost over, we want to confirm that the responsibilities were ours, whatever consequence may arise in the future.

The concerns we raised at the first meeting with the Commission were as follows: 1. Why were the residents from our district chosen to be evacuated first? Our men volunteered to go on road camps before the evacuation order was issued. Our conduct clearly showed our willingness to cooperate with the government in whatever way we could. 2. If the evacuation of all Japanese is truly inevitable, it has to be done by family units and arrangements set up accordingly. 3. We see no reason to be temporarily interned at the Hastings Park detention centre. 4.

For the time being, the departure of over-aged Issei, designated for March 28, should be postponed.

Responding to these demands and questions. Taylor gave no assurance regarding evacuation by family groups but agreed that detention at Hastings Park was not necessary. He suggested at the meeting that a possible relocation site for our residents would be a town called Kaslo. Concerning the evacuation of aged Issei, approval was not obtained. At least he promised that the aged Issei (21) would be able to stay for any medical reason.

We had no information about Kaslo and how adequate for resettlement the place would be for such a large group of people. However, soon after the proposal was presented, the movement to Kaslo was seen as a feasible option for the following two reasons: first, we had already seen and heard about the misery and tragedy of our fellow Japanese from Vancouver Island who were forced to be evacuated individually; second, we could end up on the harsh sugar beets project. Although families as units could move to this project, it would be equally difficult and tragic. We examined over and over the adequacy of Kaslo as a relocation centre. We conducted as much research as we could on the living conditions of this ghost town. As negotiations progressed, we became busier with many unanticipated issues and problems, but we also became better organized. To move to Kaslo became a realistic option.

There is one point we would like to note here. The Reverend McWilliam, Minister of the Japanese United Church in New Westminster, volunteered to work with us. He told the Committee

that he had to try to help because all the Japanese were suffering from this unfortunate evacuation process. We greatly appreciated his generous offer and took him immediately to the Buddhist temple to introduce him to Reverend Ikuta. Together then, with Rev. Ikuta and Rev. McWilliam, we planned the actual steps to be taken toward the moving. Rev. Ikuta decided to go alone with the families who were going to the sugar beet farms; our Committee would look after the rest of the people who didn't want to go there. At that time, Rev. McWilliam offered to go to Kaslo to see what the town was like. He would report when he returned. Furthermore, the kind Rev. McWilliam told us he could go anywhere and was free from curfew so to ask him to do whatever he could for the Japanese.

After his return from Kaslo, Rev. McWilliam kept working for us. He became a kind of messenger and kept everyone informed in Strawberry Hill, Surrey, Kennedy, Sunberry, Cloverdale and White Rock. These families in these areas lost contact with the Japanese community through isolation but could now join us through McWilliam's efforts.

It seems fate determined our predicament and all of us had to take its attendant responsibilities imposed on us. Were there any choices allowed us to decide the course of action? We all wrestled with the question as we were all in the same boat. After we opened up negotiations with the Commission, numerous problems, both individual and collective, came to us. The women Committee members worked very hard throughout. Their hardships were quite unique and stressful. You couldn't help crying to see

the ordeal the women were going through.

On April 30, the government ordered all naturalized Issei and any Nisei over 16 years of age to go to road camps. Altogether 42 men were involved. We got together to discuss the order which clearly showed that the government did not make any distinction between naturalized citizens and native-born Nisei. The Committee made a strong appeal to Mr. Taylor about this injustice. Mr. Taylor replied that this legal aspect was not within his jurisdiction. The only thing he could do was to see that these 42 men were moved to Taft as a group, without being dispersed individually.

As more and more men left us, those of us who had been passive and uninvolved had to come to the fore. The Committee asked for a minimum of 15 men to stay on and work as Committee members on the evacuation but the Commission refused. Only 5 men were allowed to work with the Committee. So, as part of the Committee, we five men approached and consulted the Nisei council and other organizations in Vancouver. We all agreed that the movement to Kaslo should be conducted as smoothly as possible.

We didn't have an office as such and we were not allowed to be out at night because of the curfew. Furthermore, finances for everyone became a very serious problem. Some of us were concerned about this even before the men were sent away to the road camps. We decided to take loans from various Japanese organizations. Mr. Nakamura, Mr. Baba and Mr. Ohashi got in touch with the organizations and consulted with them. Also, we decided to accept donations from individuals but we wouldn't ask

for any from families and individuals. How could we ask for financial help when all their property and possessions, which took decades to accumulate, were being liquidated? Many people, however, came to us with donations and we have a separate report on the finances in detail.

During this process, the Committee and other supporting members came to see the necessity of having a meeting place. At first we were at the Buddhist church; next, we rented a rooom at the Nakamura Fish Shop. We were forbidden to have meetings as such so we kept moving from one place to another. A third place we used was the Japanese language school room. Every day the Committee got Commission information and this had to be passed on to the community. In order to do that we had many meetings and we needed a big place to accommodate the people for general meetings. We borrowed Mr. Teramura's home often. Mr. Teramura was away on the road camp and Mrs. Teramura was kind enough to provide the space. There the Committee members got together every day. A private place was better to hold meetings in than a public place of course. People could ask for up-to-date information at Teramura's home which became a sort of information centre. Women had to make decisions on their own, e.g. whether or not to move to Kaslo, and they didn't have husbands to confer with. No wonder they were undecided. Under this unusual situation called war, most of them said little, but after they had made up their minds, they came to us and asked for the relocation.

Incidentally, it took us three weeks to decide that we would

take Kaslo after Mr. Taylor's initial proposition. Rev. McWilliam's trip to Kaslo and his detailed exmination on housing conditions, plus other information on the area and community, were of great help to us in making our final decision.

As our organization progressed, all of us on the Committee became extremely busy; thus, we applied for special permission to go out at night and this was granted. In addition, we would like to mention that the Chief of Police, Mr. Buss, offered his help to facilitate this. After our decision regarding Kaslo, we realized that repairs had to be done on the houses there. We asked the Commission to assign volunteer carpenters from among those who weren't assigned yet to road camps. Messrs Yamashite, Baba and Suzuki applied, were accepted and left to do so. Via telephone calls and telegrams, we had frequent contact with them on the conditions at Kaslo, and our contacts with the Security Commission became more and more frequent as a result. A second opening for volunteer carpenters was issued and Messrs Maruyama and Baba, together with three young Nisei from Fraser Mills, responded and left. We asked them to be our contacts in Kaslo. They reported there were a few serious problems with the facilities and that those there were doing their best to improve conditions, but certainly they weren't getting enough materials, etc. from the Commission.

In the meantime, the departure dates were announced at the end of April. Between May 11-17, a group of families and individuals were to depart from New Westminster station every other day. The five women were still functioning as liaison

regarding train schedules, which families would leave, etc. Mr. Sokichi Murakami joined the Committee as an official member to help with the packing, etc. Men were badly needed but so scarce. Everybody got together and worked on packing and all the other necessary jobs to be done.

There was some confusion on the first departure day. We negotiated for, and got, three coaches for 130 individuals, in addition to two freight coaches for the goods for the second departure.

The Commission sent a truck from Beria Trucking Company for the possessions to be picked up at each home and transferred to the station. Pacific Stage Coach was to pick up the people. In each coach were two Committee members who visited the families who were to leave. The coach was accompanied by the truck. All these provisions were requested of the Commission as these evacuees were women and children. There was a limit of 150 lbs. of luggage per person in the family. There was no detailed examination of the limit as that was delegated to the Committee members. We think everybody got to take his fair amount of goods. Except for the first day, May 11, the space in the train coaches was adequate and people had a fairly easy trip to Kaslo, we believe.

Our original project involved residents from New Westminster, Queensboro and Fraser Mills only. Later, in accordance with Rev. McWilliam's wishes, residents from Surrey, Strawberry Hill, Sunberry, and even White Rock and Cloverdale with its few individuals, joined the project to go to Kaslo. Rev. McWilliam

took care of those outside people. Despite the confusion, losing men one after another, working under a curfew, and all the other inconveniences, we have completed our project without too much turmoil, due to the cooperation and unity of the people involved.

Concerning our lives in Kaslo, we had numerous occasions to negotiate with the Commission. The Commission gave us a guarantee that the lives of the Japanese were secure; that was the only guarantee we got. There is nothing further in concrete terms so we should continue negotiations with the Commission as we proceed. The Commission promised us that they would continue to work with us once we were all in Kaslo and we agreed to cooperate. In retrospect, the Commission gave us priority in sending us to Kaslo (1,000 families from Vancouver and Steveston were required to wait) because we acted in unity as the Committee and the community. Therefore, in the years to come in Kaslo, we have to remind ourselves it is essential for us to cooperate and have the strength of the organized.

Are we going to spend all the war years in this ghost town? Nothing is certain and we are uneasy and anxious, but at least the Commission is now fully aware of the difficulty of families being separated. We can make the best of the situation, whatever it may be, if we are better organized on future projects.. We can say from our experience that we Japanese as a group should act collectively rather than individually or we will collapse. We wonder if the Vancouver residents, had they not been so scattered and fragmented, yet with their better finanacial as

well as intellectual resources, could have come through in a better way had they been united.

The Commission requested that one of the Committee men go to Kaslo to work on the problems, confusion and misunderstandings. Mr. Murakami left for that mission and stayed for two weeks. The Commission recognizes this Committee as the most united group and thus consults with the Committee and gives us some choices. Mr. Murakami was assigned to work as liaison between the Commission in Kaslo and the Japanese individuals with their various problems. Also, he was assigned to work for cooperation and better organization amongst the Japanese relocatees. Kaslo, as a relocation center, is considered the best place, yet there are numerous inconveniences, deficiency of goods and unforeseen problems. The water is clean and there is hydro, but living space is extremely small.

If the residents keep complaining, confusion is inevitable. There is no other way but to accept the situation as it is and endure. The spirit of mutual help will work if we all help each other. Moreover, how could we account for ourselves regarding this unusually difficult trial through which we are going to the generations yet to come? You are isolated in this camp from the outside world but, as you are aware, it is impossible to separate yourself from the rest of the community despite your financial or intellectual superiority. It is all right to insist on acting as individuals, but the group cannot be permitted to become disorganized by this kind of individual stance. All these problems in Kaslo, however serious they may be, will take mutual

understanding and cooperation to solve. We understand there are more than 1,000 Japanese people in Kaslo already, in addition to the ex-residents of New Westminster, who came from various places, and we have to anticipate the gravity of the situation and be ready.

As we reported earlier, five men went to Kaslo to work on the house repairs. Then a few more men were asked to join them and were accompanied by the group of women and children. We realize the necessity of male hands, regardless of age, being of great help. We have no idea what will happen after we all get settled in Kaslo but one of the concerns we have is the men who are still on the road construction projects. The Commission is fully aware that this separation is only temporary and they will do their best to unite the families soon.

Regarding our lives in Kaslo, we have been told by the Commission that there would be no shortage of food. Rather, any problems which could arise would be with each other as various conflicts arise amongst us. Only time will solve the problems.

As for us five men, we were supposed to go to road camps within 24 hours after the completion of the movement, but that was changed. We were ordered to stay on until June 1 to work with the government custodians and agents on properties, possessions and furniture. In fact we are engaged right now with that task.

According to the order, all your belongings were gathered in one of your home rooms and that room was locked. Those people who were renting their homes would have their possessions brought

to either one of the following places: the Buddhist church, the language school, or the Japanese United Church in the Queensboro district. Owners of homes were under the control of the custodian and the homes were to be rented out through his agents. So here we are, packing and delivering to the respective places. We have fears that all these possessions are securely stored.

To the three of us left behind here in New Westminster, we have added a new member, Mr. Ohta, and all of us have kept busy finishing up our work. Mr. Ohta is just 16 years of age, was sent to road camp, but came back because his father died on April 2. He had special permission to attend the funeral and then stayed on afterwards to look after his sick brother. He had cared for his mother who, as you all know, passed away last year.

Although we have been keeping ourselves extremely busy, nonetheless we believe it is very important for us to write up this report before we leave, however unfinished the report may be. Specifically for that purpose, we put aside this day; we intended to be brief but this has become a lengthy report. We have no assurance that this report will reach you because of the censorship. Anyhow, we will send copies to the delegates in the camp and hope that they can be circulated among you. This is the first time we have written on stencils, and the mimeographed copies are not very clear. We aren't used to writing and there are some misspellings but we beg your generosity and pardon. We wish you all good health.

May 28, 1942." Translated by Tomoko Makabe and Shirley Yamada.