

Powell Street Neighbourhood Before the Uprooting Interview

1941: Disruption of Education

Betty Toyota (b. 1925) talks about school, her classmates, and how her life changed after Canada declared war against Japan. She recalls passengers on the bus harassing Japanese Canadians. She describes being unable to attend her graduation in 1942 because of the curfew imposed on Japanese Canadians and how a friend picked up her diploma for her.

Excerpt from Landscapes of Injustice oral history interview with Betty Toyota and Joy Trapnell.

KYLA FITZGERALD

What were your experiences like in the elementary school everyday?

BETTY TOYOTA

At the English School?

KYLA FITZGERALD

At the English School.

BETTY TOYOTA

It was all right. Our Strathcona School, you probably heard of it, the Strathcona School.

KYLA FITZGERALD

Oh yeah.

BETTY TOYOTA

To me it was like a League of Nations there because there were so many different nationalities. We had Italians, Japanese, Chinese, even Gypsies. Oh yeah Hindus. I never thought of racism then. French people, Italian people, got along real good. There were a lot of Japanese, Chinese, Italian kids. And then we go to our Japanese School after and got to know all the Japanese people.

JOY TRAPNELL

Did you have a lot of non-Japanese friends?

BETTY TOYOTA

Just at school. Not – well out of school we're into our own community, Japanese community. So we didn't have any friends, right? But at school we got to gather, you know how you get with your school chums. As a matter of fact, I got to know quite a few English kids, but just that school. And soon as the, this is 1943, was it? Most of the Japanese kids didn't go to school, they just dropped out because they were, what you call, *hisiki*, means ... what? That word just doesn't come ... you're looked against. Oh it will come later. So the kids all feared about going to school, so they all dropped out. They just didn't finish school. And here I was in grade twelve ...

MIKE ABE

Ostracized.

JOY TRAPNELL

Oh.

BETTY TOYOTA

Hm?

MIKE ABE

Ostracized or boycotted.

BETTY TOYOTA

Ostracized. Boycotted that was it. That was it. And here I was in grade twelve and here we went to school for a whole twelve years. I skip one class, but here you denied the graduation, diploma – to me then it was important. And there was another Japanese girl, Marsha Yoshida, she lives in Vancouver now. She was really smart, real brainy. I couldn't catch up to her. Real brainy, she was always on the honour roll and all that. She said she had the same idea. You know we've got to finish school, twelve years and not having this diploma. So she says she's going: "I'm going to go to school two more months," April, May because end of May was the graduation. "Two more months I'm going to go to school." So I thought okay I'll go too. So we went, our school was in Fairview Commerce, like we had to go on the streetcar for twenty minutes. But we went on the streetcar and went to school, and of course they used to call us Jap and we got called names and all that.

JOY TRAPNELL

Oh really?

BETTY TOYOTA

Yeah. And then we finished, managed to finish school. And we were both recommended. That meant we didn't have to write exams. So we were both recommended and then we were told we graduated: "You're welcome to come to the graduation ceremony," but we couldn't go because we were denied – we were curfewed.

JOY TRAPNELL

You were curfewed.

BETTY TOYOTA

We couldn't go to the graduation ceremony, which was from eight o'clock at night in one of the small theatres close to our school. And this is what we wanted was the diploma. But one of my friends, her name was Joan Black, I got to know her. She said, "Betty we'll get the diploma for you." So I remember the day after the graduation her father on a bicycle, came and brought me the graduation diploma.

KYLA FITZGERALD

That's nice.

JOY TRAPNELL

Really?

BETTY TOYOTA

Yeah that was it. And to me that was important because it showed that we went to school for twelve years. Why give that up?

JOY TRAPNELL

Yeah. But that other, like you said, other Japanese students did drop out just because they didn't want to face all the name calling and criticism.

BETTY TOYOTA

I guess so. They were scared. Oh yeah they were scared. They said, "Oh you're silly, I wouldn't go to school, forget about it!" because by that time the Japanese school was closed too.

JOY TRAPNELL

Yeah.

BETTY TOYOTA

So I guess they didn't want to go to school, but I thought ... Well I wouldn't have gone if I was by myself, but Masako she said she was going to go so I thought, "Oh I'll go with her." And I was kind of glad I did.

JOY TRAPNELL

Absolutely.

BETTY TOYOTA

Just to get the diploma.

MIKE ABE

Those who didn't, that's almost a form of dispossession, right? You get denied that, your twelve years of school.

JOY TRAPNELL

Even if by choice, they didn't finish.

MIKE ABE

Well, yeah.

BETTY TOYOTA

Well I went eleven years because I remember skipping grade three or four or something.

JOY TRAPNELL

Oh you were brainy. Come from good stock.