

LESSON 4 SOURCE 4.10 INTERNMENT AND EXILE

The following excerpts come from two secondary sources describing the limited choices given to Japanese Canadians for relocation in the spring and summer of 1945.

The Mackenzie-King government, under pressure from both media and certain politicians, made a decision to require that all Canadians of Japanese heritage (“Japanese race”) move east of the Rocky Mountains or face “voluntary repatriation” to Japan. After government officials conducted a survey in the camps offering small payments for “voluntary repatriation” of those unable to move east, 10,632 people over age sixteen signed the papers (or in the case of minor dependents were included with their parents’ signatures), but there was widespread confusion over whether the deportation orders that ensued would be reversed upon making suitable arrangements to move within Canada. An order for dispersal out of British Columbia had come down in August 1944, along with an ultimatum either to sign forms making arrangements for deportation or to move east, but there were no provisions for implementation.

[A number of reasons kept Japanese Canadians in the camps], including: fear of experiencing racism and even violence from white populations east of the Rockies; lack of any economic security after moving; age, illness, or disability; experiences of intimidation on the part of government officials toward those who did not sign for repatriation; and perhaps most important, a belief that even those who signed could retract their decisions once they were able to arrange for movement east. After the deadline in January 1946, there were 4,520 remaining signees, of whom 3,957 (almost 20 percent of the pre-1940s Japanese Canadian population) were sent to Japan on five ship crossings between April and August. A series of orders-in-council

defined as “deportable” all those Japanese nationals who had originally signed, those naturalized Canadians or Canadian-born citizens who signed but had not revoked their requests prior to the January deadline, and all dependents of these groups. All those subject to deportation, including the Canadian-born, were stripped of their Canadian citizenship.

Anecdotal evidence portrays the harsh conditions faced by the exiles upon arrival in Japan. Tatsuo Kage’s survey of twenty-five individuals tells of poor quality and limited supplies of food, difficulty finding employment (although a number of Nisei were able to find work with the occupational government in Tokyo, mainly as translators), and, in some cases, resentment on the part of those in Japan that the Canadians had landed among them to reduce resources even farther. According to best estimates, nearly half of the exiled eventually returned to Canada, but little is known about how the decision was made to return or not. Nor is much known about the varied conditions faced by the exiles:

Excerpt from Audrey Kobayashi, et al. “Exile: Mapping the Migration Patterns of Japanese Canadians Exiled to Japan in 1946.” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2018, pp. 73–89. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist.37.4.0073.

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... While new agreements were under negotiation, no provincial government, except Saskatchewan’s, had expressed a willingness to accept Japanese Canadians. That is why, Japanese Canadians were told, the government was offering such generous terms “to those who come to the conclusion that conditions might be too difficult for them in Canada and the opportunity might be better ... in Japan.”

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The manner in which the survey was presented only reinforced what Japanese Canadians already knew. Everyone knew of someone who had gone east and met with difficulty. They knew that the eastern cities were over-crowded with war workers and that housing was often poor, very expensive and very difficult for Japanese to obtain. They knew that many of the Nisei who had gone east were working in dirty, low-paying jobs, and that they had met with discrimination in public places and even in some churches. Most also knew of the hostility and violence the Japanese Americans were experiencing on their return to the Pacific Coast. They feared that similar violence might erupt in Canada once the war in Europe was over and Canada's full attention was focussed on the war with Japan.

In addition, morale in the camps was at an all-time low in the spring of 1945. The classic signs of failing morale were everywhere: neglected homes and gardens; an upsurge in petty quarrels, some of which became violent; rising consumption of alcohol; increased gambling; fewer community activities; a sullen restlessness among the young. Battered by the triple shocks of uprooting, dispossession and destitution, some of the inmates had slipped into a reserve mentality. Their poverty, combined with three years of obeying orders they despised, had stripped some of any hope of regaining control over their own lives. Apathetic, some inmates were ripe for manipulation by anyone with strong views, and in the detention camps the strongest views were held by the pro-Japan patriots. The patriots firmly believed that Japan must inevitably defeat the Allies. Relying on shortwave broadcasts from Tokyo, they had formed very unrealistic ideas about the progress of the war. They dismissed the victories reported in the Canadian press as propaganda, and countered that Japan's apparent retreat was a strategic move "to draw her enemies into one spot and

defeat them." Bolstered by their belief in Japan's imminent victory, the pro-Japan element welcomed the repatriation survey and attacked any who championed resettlement. By coercing friends, neighbours and family members into signing for repatriation, the pro-Japan element unwittingly helped the Canadian government.

Many also believed that there was no need for hasty resettlement. Like most Canadians and Americans, they believed that the war with Japan would go on for years, a belief reinforced by Japanese propaganda that claimed Japan could fight for another twenty years. In 1945, given the tenacity with which the Japanese army was defending the Pacific islands, this was not unreasonable. Indeed, fear of a long and costly campaign against Japan is assumed to have been one element in President Truman's decision a few months later to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The confusion, the indecision, the anger, the fear, the misunderstandings and the very real practical problems were all reflected in the letters Japanese Canadians wrote in the spring of 1945. "Such a hubbub as you cannot imagine at the time of registration here," an inmate at New Denver wrote. "Some took the attitude that if relocation was forced, they would rather repatriate. So much confusion and uncertainty.... Almost as bad as the turbulent days of pre-evacuation when the destination of folks was so uncertain." "If I don't go to Japan," an elderly man interned at Angler, Ontario, informed his sister, "there is no other place for me to go. My wife has been sick over a year and a half ... I have two children in school in Japan. My house where I lived for so long is sold for almost nothing."

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For two families at Greenwood, worries about jobs and family separation were the deciding factors. “Mrs T. and her son decided [to sign] to go to Japan,” a woman wrote her husband at Angler,

because if they do not the daughters will lose their jobs, and also they did not know where they would be forced to go and did not want to be all separated, so they could not help but sign to go to Japan.... No one wants to sign by their own choice. However, when one thinks of the present situation it is better to sign so that we can all be together rather than being separated. So I am one of those who signed because I want my family to be together.

For a family at Cascade, it was future — not present — employment opportunities that decided their fate. “Yesterday we thought it over,” the wife reported to a friend in Ontario. “My husband said it would be better to go back to Japan because he is too old to get any work in this country. Therefore our whole family has decided to go back to Japan after the war.” That whole family probably included some Nisei who may not have been willing to “go back” to Japan.

While some Nisei quietly accepted their parents’ decision, others made up their own minds, making their decisions sometimes in anger, sometimes in confusion, sometimes in optimism. For a Nisei at Oyama, B.C., anger won out:

All this stinking system gets stinkier every moment.... Those God-damned so-and-so’s don’t give a hoot as to what happens to us so long as they get paid for asking or rather telling us to do radical things.... If it isn’t one thing, it’s something else, namely the cussed Custodian. All this junk about a so-called democracy, racial equality

and toleration, all men are born equal. Like the devil they are. Chase us from one place to another, stick us into places worse than pig pens or cow stalls....

For a relocated Nisei in Montreal whose family still lived in New Denver, the decision was harder. “What is your real opinion?” he demanded of his sister:

... My way of thinking is that it is going to be tough wherever we are at. Japan ain’t going to be a bed of roses. You can bet on that.... On the other hand if we stay here there is going to be tough monetary discrimination, but at least we know what we are in for.... What is in store for us if we do go to Japan? What chances have I or we got? That is what I am afraid of. What chances for survival have we got there? ... I know it is going to be tough wherever we go. I figure we are worse thought of than Jews are. Canada or Japan won’t accept us into the society of the human....

Excerpt from Sunahara, Ann Gomer. “Fighting Deportation.” *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War*, James Lorimer and Company, 1981, pp. 119–123.