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Michiko Midge Ayukawa

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To my late parents:

Ishii Kenji (1895-1971)

Ishii Misayo (1900-2001)

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This research into the pre–Second World War Japanese-Canadian society, primarily on the west coast of British Columbia, would not have been carried out without the perspicacity and encouragement of Dr. E. Patricia Tsurumi, who believed that the vivid memories of my childhood and of this now lost community should be probed and analyzed. The writing of this book was stalled for a time, until a number of historians urged me to complete it and offered assistance. I am especially indebted to Dr. Patricia E. Roy for her kind patience and expertise at this stage.

During the research period, my mother, Ishii Misayo, encouraged me and shared with me her many memories. It is unfortunate that she passed away in her 101st year, before this book came to fruition. My

five children, their spouses, and my grandchildren, who now total ten, unselfishly carried on without the full attention of the family "matriarch."

If I have in some small way been able to paint a picture of the early lives of pioneer immigrants from Hiroshima and the milieu in which they lived – covering both the positive and the negative aspects – I am sure my parents will be happy. I regret now that I had little understanding of their world prior to conducting my research.

Prologue

November 1983, Hisayamada, Onomichi city, Hiroshima prefecture. After a treacherous drive along a narrow, hilly road, we stopped in front of a small residence attached to a long, barrack-like building. My blonde friend, my maternal uncle Takata Tomoki, and I stepped out of the car and were immediately surrounded. My eyes fell in turn on four people: a beautiful woman in a pale-green kimono, an older woman, a toddler, and a young mother. They all smiled and bowed repeatedly as the young driver, my late cousin's son, Ishii Kazuhiko, gravely introduced us. I was tongue-tied, partly owing to my inability to voice appropriate Japanese phrases, but much more by the emotional impact of meeting kinfolk for the first time in my life.

I recovered sufficiently to introduce Helen, a friend since my youth. During our struggle through honours chemistry at McMaster University from 1948 to 1952 we had developed a strong bond, and she had eagerly accompanied me on this, my first trip to my parents' homeland. My relatives had rarely seen a *hakujin* (literally "white person") and had certainly never hosted one. Her red pantsuit, unusual on an adult in Japan, added to their bewilderment. They were shy but recovered their innate hospitality and ushered us into the *tatami* room (a formal parlour with rush mats), where a familiar photograph of Ishii Chōkichi, my paternal grandfather and Ishii Kazuhiko's great-grandfather, looked down upon us.

My hosts were descendants of my father's eldest brother, Ishii Seiichi, who had assumed the headship of the household when my grandfather left his humble terraced farm in 1906 to seek his fortune overseas. Seiichi, then a young man of twenty, had struggled to provide for his mother, his siblings, and later his own family of six children. Yet he had lived ninety-nine long years, twenty-three longer than my father, who had been nine years his junior.

It was obvious that my hosts had made careful preparations for my visit. Although my father's relatives were now professional people, they had had a humble past. Placed close to the cushions on which Helen and I kneeled uncomfortably were old photographs of their family and mine. I recognized many as similar to those I had often lingered over during my childhood in Vancouver. As we studied them together, I identified some people – in particular, the one in the kimono who now sat across from me. I asked what had happened to some of the others. Two male cousins had died, but three of the women were now living in Osaka. I resolved then that I would make efforts to meet my Osaka cousins, especially Nobuko, the one who was the same age I was. I wondered how my life might have gone had my father not immigrated to Canada.

During that visit, my hosts took me to the family grave, where I awkwardly stood by, uncomfortable with my ignorance of the customary ritual. To this day, I muse about what they thought of my unusual behaviour as they lit some incense and placed some greenery before the stone markers. I understood that their present home was not the ancestral family farm. In answer to my query about where my father's home had been, Kazuhiko pointed to a distant wooded area and told me, "Way over there."

That evening, my Takata uncle and his wife held a dinner party for me to meet my maternal relatives. Kazuhiko and his younger sister were also invited. Unlike my father's family, my mother's family had always been affluent and had an impressive lineage. My uncle, who was my mother's half-brother, lived in a renovated mansion, the ancestral home in which my mother had been reared. He also had rental houses nearby and a newly built guesthouse, as well as fig and mandarin groves. Perhaps because of the easy-going personality of this uncle, the Takata family was much more relaxed with us and welcomed us with light-hearted warmth. At the dinner was another uncle, Kōmoto Noriyoshi, and his married daughter Kiyomi. Noriyoshi had taken the surname of his wife when he married; that is, he had become a *yōshi* (adopted husband). He had fathered only one daughter, Kiyomi, who in turn had an adopted husband. As the sake flowed, Noriyoshi regaled me with stories of his youth and of the years he had spent in China with the Japanese army. It appeared that the passing of years had erased the harshness of those experiences. His stories reminded me sharply of the very different lives of my brothers, who had been designated as "enemy aliens" in Canada and had not been recruited into the military.

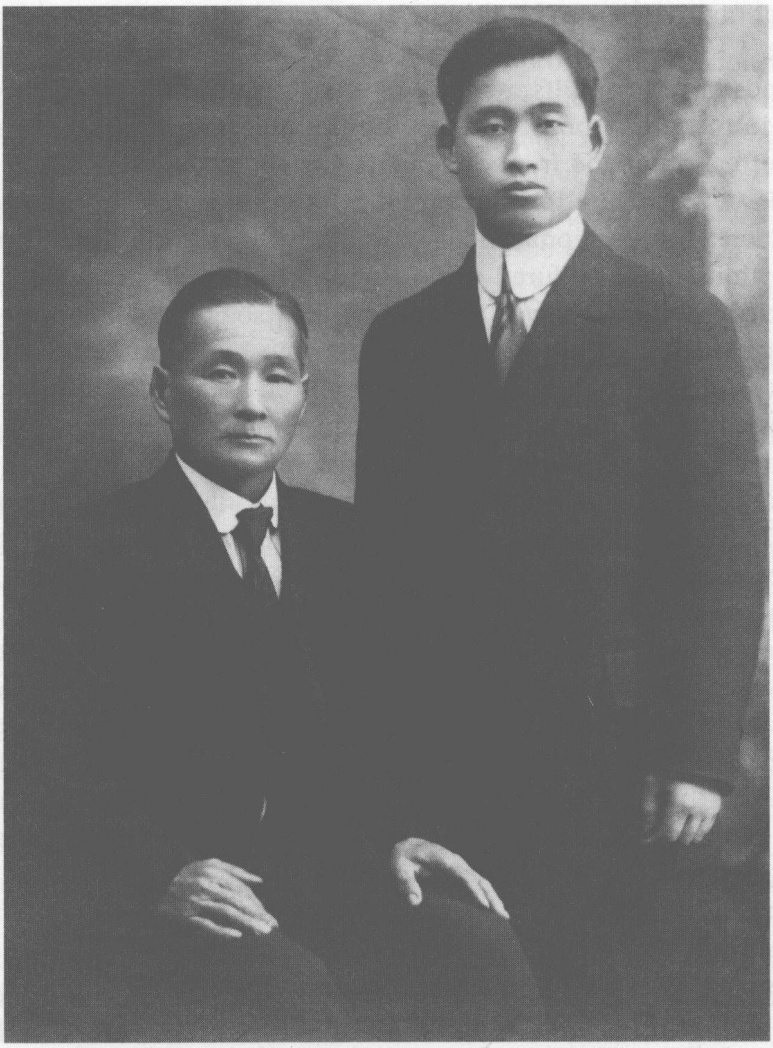
That night, Helen and I, although exhausted from the long and eventful day, talked for hours as we struggled with the soft mattress and mounds of heavy quilts over the Western-style bed in the guesthouse. Well into the wee hours of the morning my brain whirled from one scene to another and from one puzzle to the next.

This visit sent me forward on an odyssey, a search for my roots. I considered the emotional and practical difficulties my father and grandfather must have endured when they left their village and, with no knowledge of its language or customs, had sought their fortune in a strange land. And how did my parents, who had such different backgrounds, meet and marry? But now, at least, I understood why my parents used to dream of returning to Japan for an early retirement. They had never been able to achieve that goal. When at long last they were able to return for a visit after forty years of marriage, they realized that they had become Canadians and that the Japan they yearned for no longer existed. Both became happy with their life in Ontario, and neither wished to return even for another visit.

I began to take some Japanese history courses at the University of Victoria. I also went to visit my elderly mother in her seniors' apartment in Hamilton. For two weeks we quietly talked in a way we never had before. She answered my many questions quite willingly when I explained that they were for a course assignment. She had always made great personal sacrifices for my education in my youth, and she still supported my academic endeavours.

I emerged with a sketchy picture of the lives of my pioneer grandfather and my parents. My grandfather, Ishii Chōkichi, had set sail in the early 1900s with several other men from his district. They had been enticed with promises that they would be able to solve all their financial problems by going to Hawaii for a few years. Stories about the men and women from the Hiroshima city area who worked in Hawaii's sugar cane fields and sent money home had reached as far as the eastern outskirts of Hiroshima prefecture, where the Ishii family tilled their modest rice plot. My grandfather and his neighbours were eager to try their luck.

They had passports for Hawaii, but the recruiters persuaded them to travel even farther, to North America. Since this extension was illegal, there are no immigration records.[1] I surmise that they were among the many who landed in Victoria, the Canadian port of entry, in 1906-07.[2] This sudden influx of Japanese immigrants aroused anti-Asian feelings, and in September 1907 a parade and Asiatic Exclusion League rally at Vancouver City Hall culminated in an ugly riot in Chinatown and



1 This photo of Ishii Chōkichi and Kenji was taken in Vancouver before Chōkichi returned to Japan, probably 1917.

Japantown. In its aftermath, Canada and Japan negotiated the Lemieux-Hayashi Gentlemen's Agreement, which was intended to limit Japanese male immigration. In fact, it led inadvertently to the arrival of wives and the beginnings of settlement.

Chōkichi worked here and there in coastal British Columbia and then urged his seventeen-year-old son, my father, to join him in 1912. Father and son laboured on the same work gangs for about five years. Then Chōkichi became ill and returned to Japan, where he died soon after. A few years later, my father's marriage was arranged, and in 1921 he returned to Japan to marry my mother, a pampered, adventurous young

woman from a neighbouring village. He had promised her that they would return to Japan in five years, so she left her trousseau of quilts and furniture behind.

I thought about my parents' lives, both in Japan and in Canada, and reflected on my own childhood. My life had been devoid of cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. My family had been "nuclear" before the term had been coined. Yet there had been "aunts" and "uncles" – surrogate relatives, who had always been around us to provide a support system. Most of these people had been born in Hiroshima. I wondered what Canada's society had been like for the Issei (literally, the first generation, the immigrants). How had it compared with the world they left behind? How difficult had it been for my parents to leave home to pursue their dreams – even if (so they believed) only for five years? It appeared inconceivable that my mother had actually believed that five years was a realistic period, or that my father had sincerely thought that it was possible.

Eager to learn more about my ancestors' past and the alien environment in which they had staked their dreams, I soon became a full-time student of Canadian and Japanese history. I also resumed my Japanese language studies, which had been interrupted in December 1941 after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Gradually, a picture emerged of the racist society that the Japanese pioneers had encountered in British Columbia. Xenophobia and notions of white supremacy had prevailed in British Columbia since the mid-nineteenth century, and lawmakers had imposed restrictions on Asian immigrants. Yet for the Japanese in Canada, persecution and racism did not plague every aspect of daily life. When I was a child in the 1930s, there had been a vibrant Japanese-Canadian community full of confident men and women, both young and old. My memory is not of people who were downtrodden or intimidated by the world around them. I felt the urge to probe and investigate the society of those people.

Ten years after that first trip to Japan in 1983, I made a much longer visit on my own, travelling from Tokyo as far as Nagasaki, partly as a tourist but primarily as a researcher. I met and talked at length with friends, relatives, and academics. At first I was overwhelmed by the complexities of the society and the language, and at times I was so discouraged that I was tempted to give up. But eventually I learned how to travel with ease on the trains and buses and even to roam around the streets of Hiroshima city and other areas of historic significance. In Hiroshima city, Nishimoto Masami, a reporter for *Chūgoku shinbun* who had interviewed me a few years earlier in Victoria, was of invaluable

help. I had met him when he was on assignment to research the lives of Hiroshima immigrants in Canada. Through him and another contact I met some relatives of immigrants in Canada; I was also able to consult the authors of a series of books on the history of Hiroshima prefecture.

On returning to Victoria, I read the Japanese-language articles and books I had acquired. I also travelled across Canada to interview surviving early immigrants as part of an in-depth study of the people who had immigrated to Canada from Hiroshima prefecture. There was an urgency to this project, since the pioneers were now all elderly; even the Nisei (the second-generation Japanese Canadians) were now senior citizens.

I had planned to investigate the early history of Japanese immigrants: the reasons why they immigrated, their social backgrounds, their regions of origin in Japan, and their lives in Canada. It soon became clear that this history comprised a number of separate though intertwining stories of emigration from a number of different parts of Japan. Much like the stories of other ethnic groups who had immigrated to Canada, the story of the Japanese would have to involve a series of "micro studies that constitute the economic, social, and cultural conditions of the sending areas."[3]

Although Japan is a small country of only 142,707 square miles, variations in climate, proximity to the ocean, fertility of the soil, and other factors have generated regional differences.[4] Beyond these physical variations are social ones. For more than two-and-a-half centuries, the Tokugawa regime (1600-1868) had held on to power through strict measures, some of which precluded free movement. As a result of policies that forced peasants to remain on the land in their villages, rural communities became insulated and developed different customs and dialects. The demands of their lords and regional calamities also affected the lives of the villagers.[5] Although the Meiji government opened the doors to emigration in 1885 as a possible solution to rural poverty, actual emigration policies were determined by the prefectural governments. Some prefectures encouraged it; others discouraged it.[6] The zeal of the central government's recruiters, local economic conditions, village officials' predilections, and later, the activities of emigration companies, which went from village to village in some areas, also had a strong influence. How the immigrants lived in Canada, which jobs they took, and whether they settled permanently or saved their earnings with the goal of returning home also varied according to their roots.

Even during my period of investigation – the late Meiji, Taisho (1912-26), and early Showa (1926-89) – people from Hiroshima were seen as having different characteristics from, for example, those from Shiga

prefecture, which also sent substantial numbers of emigrants to Canada. Shiga was noted for its entrepreneurs. *Ōmi-shōnin,* salesmen from that area, used to travel throughout Japan selling goods; later, in Canada, many people from Shiga became business proprietors. This is well illustrated by Audrey Kobayashi's study of the village of Kaideima, on the eastern shore of Lake Biwa in Shiga prefecture.[7] Kaideima was prone to flooding, and particularly severe floods in 1896 precipitated emigration from there, especially to British Columbia. The money these people earned in Canada, mainly by labouring in sawmills and by operating shops around Vancouver's Powell Street, did much more than keep their relatives alive. Almost 70 percent of the Shiga immigrants whom Kobayashi studied returned to their villages, bought land, built majestic homes, and donated money to the local Buddhist temple. Of the 135 Shiga households (535 immigrants), only 30 remained in Canada after the Second World War.[8] As we shall see, Hiroshima immigrants tended to settle and remain in Canada.

Emigration also varied according to region. For instance, in the Tōhoku region in northern Honshu (see Map 1), where poverty was often widespread and severe, villagers typically lacked even the minimum economic resources that would enable them to book passage to Canada. Yet some individuals were able to encourage and arrange emigration for their fellow villagers. Oikawa Jinsaburō made Herculean efforts to urge people from Miyagi prefecture in Tōhoku to emigrate.[9] Oikawa first went to Canada in 1896. On his return to his home village in 1899, he tried to recruit both men and women to work in his dog salmon (chum) and salmon roe salteries in Canada. Wherever he went in Miyagi prefecture, he heard heart-rending stories of the previous year's famine, which had caused many to die of starvation. But passage to Canada cost sixty yen – an impossible amount for any of the local villagers to accrue, so only nine people followed him. Seven years later, in 1906, he returned to the area with a daring venture. He was able to recruit eighty-two people, including three women, who sailed in September on the *Suianmaru,* which he had hired to transport them illegally to Canada. They landed at Becher Bay near Victoria and were caught, but were allowed to stay. These immigrants were eventually able to remit money to their home villages to keep their families from starving. This sort of desperate poverty was not a principal theme in the stories of the Hiroshima immigrant families.

Another man, Kuno Gihei, rescued Miomura, a fishing village in Wakayama prefecture broadly known as Amerika-mura (America village), from obliteration. Kuno's poverty-stricken village depended entirely on fishing. Once the fishers began venturing farther and farther

out and returning with more and more meagre catches, Kuno urged them to go to Canada to fish for salmon. For a number of years those fishers who followed his advice returned to Miomura from Canada in the off-season; later, though, they immigrated with their families. The vast majority of these Wakayama fishers settled in Steveston at the mouth of the Fraser River. A fair number eventually returned to Japan to live comfortably on the fruits of their labour and on the monies remitted to them by sons left behind in Canada; many, though, realized that Miomura could not provide any permanent sustenance and chose to remain in Canada.[10] Like the Hiroshima emigrants, they stayed; unlike the Hiroshima immigrants, they fished.

In Hiroshima too, there were villages, especially in Asa, Aki, and Saeki counties, from which large numbers emigrated.[11] (See Map 2 of Hiroshima prefecture with the county divisions.) A table in a history of Hiroshima tells us that by 1910 there were twenty-six villages from which more than 270 people had emigrated. From as few as 3.1 percent to as many as 25.6 percent of these villagers had done so.[12] And these numbers do not include those who had moved to the colonies of Taiwan, Sakhalin, or Korea. So it is clear that emigration overseas was fairly common among villagers in some parts of Hiroshima. In fact, Hiroshima people often led the way to foreign lands, and their apparent success created many "emigrant villages" in the prefecture. The first to leave went to Hawaii as contract labourers in January 1885; 222 of this group of 945 were from Hiroshima.[13] In Canada as well, the first contract Japanese immigrants were all from Hiroshima. They arrived in 1891 to work in the mines at Cumberland, Vancouver Island.

Hiroshima was the third-largest source of Japanese immigrants to Canada, trailed by Shiga and Wakayama prefectures.[14] According to a study conducted in British Columbia in 1934, of the 574 Japanese immigrants surveyed, 8 percent were from Hiroshima. Of these, almost half lived in Vancouver, almost one-quarter on farms, and just over one-quarter in company towns. None of them were fishers.[15]

By focusing on Hiroshima immigrants to Canada, I hoped to show how regional identities influence personal behaviour and community networking. My family's own roots offered me special advantages as well as personal qualifications for this study. Having been born to Hiroshima immigrants and having lived within the rather narrow confines of Vancouver's Japanese-Canadian society in the 1930s, I had acquired useful tools for understanding these people and their history from their earliest days in BC. Every day, after primary school, I attended the

Alexander Street Japanese Language School in Japantown; then on Sundays I would go to the Buddhist Sunday School at the corner of Princess and Cordova Streets. I had probably been enculturated to Hiroshima customs and traditions and also to the regional dialect. Also, my 1983 visit to Japan had pointed me toward "insider" research into the history of the Hiroshima immigrants in Canada.

After first studying Canadian and Japanese history and improving my Japanese-language skills (which I sorely needed to do), I embarked on my study of Japanese-Canadian history. My BA essay and MA thesis both involved translating the memoirs of Mrs. Imada Ito, a pioneer woman who had arrived in Canada in 1911. Luckily for me, she had come from Saeki county, from a village that is now part of the city of Hiroshima. I gathered a vivid picture of village life from her descriptions of her childhood on a farm, her stay in her in-laws' home before she joined her husband, and her temporary return to the village with three children in 1918.[16] She was a product of her village, and the way she conducted herself in Canada must have partly reflected her background as a Hiroshima woman. She had written her memoirs in a unique blend of Meiji Japanese, fractured English, and a Hiroshima dialect, combining *hiragana* (cursive script), *katakana* (phonetic script, used for foreign words), and *kanji* (Chinese ideograms). Her language had been confusing to scholars from Japan, but it was very familiar to me. When I had some question regarding an idiomatic expression, a phone call to my elderly mother would answer it. In her memoirs, Mrs. Imada mentioned many people who appeared in my later research.

As I carried out my study, a picture emerged of both the homogeneity and the individuality of the immigrants. They had sought fortune in Canada for a variety of reasons. Some came alone; a number had been recruited by emigration companies; many others had been hired by a previous immigrant who had returned to his home village to gather a work crew for a specific venture. Some were wildly successful in Canada: Kaminishi Kannosuke and Sasaki Shūichi ended up owning lumber camps, sawmills, and forest tracts. Other immigrants became prosperous farmers, struggling farmers, mill workers, or small businessmen. Some were caring and family-oriented men; others were lazy and selfish; still others spent every penny they earned on gambling and liquor. Some community leaders sacrificed their own families in order to help others. There were adventurers and daredevils, and some who beat their wives, but most of them were like my father – just steady workers who sacrificed for their families.[17]

Some women had chosen to immigrate to "Amerika"; others had merely acquiesced to their parents' suggestions that they marry overseas men. These women found their lives in Canada extremely difficult: they had no extended family to help them, and they worked both inside and outside the home. Those who were burdened with irresponsible husbands became breadwinners; or they just gave up and abandoned their families, or committed suicide.

The pioneers waged an ongoing battle against racism; in this, they were supported and defended by the Japanese government through the consul in Vancouver. When the provincial legislature passed discriminatory laws against the Japanese immigrants, the Japanese government appealed to Britain on their behalf, citing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which was in force between 1902 and 1921. The Canadian government disallowed some of BC's laws; even so, the racism institutionalized by the ones that remained demoted the Japanese Canadians to an inferior status in the province. At the same time, BC's business community victimized Japanese labourers, paying them badly in order to maximize profits. And within the Japanese community, predatory contractors, "the bosses," actively participated in this process. They negotiated with the hiring companies, offering work crews at lower wages, and the Japanese labourers felt obligated and grateful to them. As the years went by, the economic gap between the labourers and their "benefactors" widened; and all the while, the *dekasegi* (literally, "going out to work" – that is, temporary migrant workers) evolved into permanent settlers as they married and raised families. Those who belonged to this immigrant community had a wide range of goals. The Nisei were exposed to mainstream culture at public schools and through the media, but most parents tried to raise them to be proud of their Japanese heritage and to be fluent in Japanese.[18] The province's social and economic climate made this necessary. Many Nisei struggled to make a living at hard labour and menial jobs, much like their immigrant parents; but some became successful businessmen and professionals.

The history of the Hiroshima people is a vital part of the history of British Columbia. It was in BC that these immigrants struggled against anti-Asian racism, discriminatory labour practices, and anti-Japanese legislation in the hope of achieving their dreams. Over the years, the Hiroshima immigrants largely succeeded in controlling and directing their own destinies – at least, until the bombing of Pearl Harbor by their ancestral country destroyed the Japanese-Canadian community.