

Interviewee: David Azuma
Interviewer: Lisa Uyeda
Date: June 16, 2010
Location: Toronto, Ontario
Accession Number: 2010-028



THE JAPANESE CANADIAN LEGACY PROJECT

Lisa Uyeda: – this one, and we're all set. [audio clicking noises] Great, and so we're only going to be asking first names. So we're going to leave your last name, okay? So, this is an interview with David, on June 16, 2010, at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, and David, what city were you born in? What city were you born in?

David Azuma: Toronto.

LU: Toronto. Let me just get this –

DA: Can you talk a little louder?

LU: Sorry. [laughter] I will, then.

DA: And slowly.

LU: So, you were born in Toronto, in Canada, and what year were you born?

DA: 1926.

LU: And what is your birthday?

DA: June 3rd.

LU: June 3rd, and what generation Canadian are you?

DA: Second.

LU: Second generation, so *nisei*?

DA: Right.

LU: Right, and your parents were born in Japan?

DA: Right. [nods]

LU: Can you tell us a little bit about where they were born?

DA: My dad was born in Kyushu, Kagoshima.

LU: Mm-hmm. And –

DA: And my mother was born in Shiga-ken.

LU: In Shiga-ken, and when did your parents come to Vancouver? And to Canada?

DA: I have no idea.

LU: No idea?

DA: Well, let's see – my older sister's 84, so it has to be – no, she's 86 now. So it has been just before that, yes.

LU: And do you know why they came to Canada?

DA: Well, just like the rest of them – poor people have to get out of Japan.

LU: And where did they first live in Canada?

DA: Vancouver.

LU: In Vancouver, and how many siblings do you have?

DA: I have two brothers and a sister.

LU: And what – what sibling are you? Are you the third?

DA: I'm the oldest son.

LU: The oldest son, and you have one older sister?

DA: Yep.

LU: Mm-hmm. What do you remember about where you lived before the war?

DA: Well, of course, Toronto.

LU: So you lived in Toronto?

DA: And when I was 8, we were sent back to Japan.

LU: Oh, okay.

DA: To – well, because we were born in Toronto, we couldn't speak Japanese, you see, so it was hard to converse with our own parents, so they decided we'll go back to Japan to learn.

LU: To learn Japanese?

DA: Yeah.

LU: Right, and how long were you in Japan for?

DA: 15 years. Well, because the war broke out, we couldn't get back, you see.

LU: So what did you do in Japan when the war was going on?

DA: You know, I was fortunate enough. I had enough education in electronics, so I worked in a lab, and eventually I worked in a navy lab.

LU: In the navy lab.

DA: Yeah.

LU: And what did you do there?

DA: Working on a secret mission. [laughter]

LU: Oh! [laughter] So tell us a little bit about life in Japan before – before the war happened? Do you remember much about it?

DA: Well, most – well [I wasn't say] – I was in school, and then war – the war broke out, and – 'course, we have no way of getting money from my father, right? So I quit school and I went to Tokyo, and I took a crash course in electronics and I got a job at a lab, and I worked in a lab – and now like – eventually, as I said, I was picked up by the navy to work in their lab 'til the end of the war.

LU: Oh. So do you think you would have returned to Toronto or to Canada before the war happened, if you had a choice?

DA: Probably we would have, yeah, if we knew the war was coming.

LU: Mm-hmm. So who went to Japan with you?

DA: Mother.

LU: Your mother.

DA: And the siblings.

LU: And your siblings.

DA: Four.

LU: So what did your father do when he stayed here?

DA: He worked for the CPR – that's Canadian Pacific Railway Company – in a roundhouse. I don't know whether you know roundhouses. Well that time, they had no diesel. It was all steam engines, so they needed lot of repair, so they build the roundhouse, turntable in the centre, to bring the train in and turn the turntable around to go into the proper garage.

LU: Oh. Okay.

DA: And then maintain the machines.

LU: So did you have much contact with your father when he was here in Canada, before the war, and during the war, and after the war?

DA: Well, correspondence.

LU: Mm-hmm. Did you hear from him a lot through letters, and –

DA: Mostly letters.

LU: Yeah. Yeah. Do you find it was difficult to send him letters during the wartimes?

DA: Everything was cut off. As soon as the war broke out, that was it.

LU: So what was it like not being able to hear from him for, for a while?

DA: Well, I don't remember but I was busy, working, and my mother lived with me, you see. And my older sister married and two other brothers worked in a different company, so yeah.

LU: Okay, and –

DA: Then 1944 – I guess in the summer of 1944, the Japanese navy, they lost a big – major war in the South Pacific. Call it Midway. They lost all their ships, you see.

LU: Oh.

DA: And then the tide of the war changed, and then the Americans start to attacking us, right? 'Cause I remember the first plane came over us, 19 – Christmas of 1944.

LU: What happened?

DA: They just came over to look over us, I guess, and then they flew up – so high up, the anti-aircraft gun couldn't reach that high and our [4 0 Sent home ?], he couldn't go up that high because he had no oxygen with him. So – what'd they call it? Flying saucer – flying – it must come soon – I can't remember now. So, you know, they just flew over at their will. So once they found that out – every night they came over Japan, in 1945.

LU: What was that like?

DA: During the day, they attacked factories and stuff. In the nighttime, they attacked the civilians and then you know, the Japan – Japanese houses then were built with paper and wood, right? And no undergrounds or basement. So it's just like putting a match to paper, right? And they attacked like, every night, different cities, and our turn came on March 15th.

LU: So what did you do to stay safe?

DA: [sighs]Well I almost lost a life then, 'cause I was living with my mother like I said, and next door there was an old lady who lived with her son, but that night, her son was away in business trip, right? So when the sirens started – come, I went to see the next door to come out with us, right? And she refused. She says, "No, I'm waiting for –" Her son to come, right? But by the time I finally got out the main street, what was all around it but fire? So I said, "Well, this is it." Right? And from out of nowhere, a mounted soldier came up and he saw us and says go to certain way, right? And actually, we ended up in a park. So actually was – actually we're saved, you know?

LU: So did your house catch on fire?

DA: The whole city's – [waves hand]

LU: Everything's gone.

DA: This is just south of Tokyo, southern part of Tokyo, right.

LU: So what did you do after that?

DA: Since I worked in a factory, I went into the dorm and I sent my mother back to Shiga-ken.

LU: And who did she stay with?

DA: She rented a house.

LU: Oh, and what happened after that? So you stayed in a dorm for a little while. Then what did you do?

DA: And then – well, the war ended. That was on August 15th, I believe. And then – oh again, the section manager I worked for started his own business, and he asked me to come and work for him and I went there to him. Then he started making speakers, so I was a designer for speakers. And I don't know what about – you know, hi-fi, we have to have a woofer for – woofer is a large speaker for the lowest sound, and we use a little speaker called tweeter for the high-end sound, like violins and stuff. And, and the idea came out that why can't we make one speaker that produce high and low-end sound, right? So I worked on that, and I don't – I think I'm the first one who designed the first oversized speaker. It's called oversized, like egg-shaped. So – and then a new building was built and then I was made in charge of the production. Then I called my mother to live with me and called two other brothers to help. Yeah, so. So that was the first time the whole family got together.

LU: And what was that like?

DA: It was nice, because I had control of the whole thing of the operation, so – and I think this was about 20, [22?].

LU: So when did you decide to come back to Canada?

DA: Well, of course, at that – by then, correspondence was re-established, so we start getting letters from our father, to come back to Canada, right? And because of the position I had, I said I didn't want to go back, but Mom says if I didn't go, she wouldn't go – come back to Canada. So I said, Mom – Canada – I'll come back too. So that's 1949, sometime in May. Landed in Toronto June 3rd, on my birthday.

LU: Oh, good day. [laughter] And was your father there waiting for you?

DA: 'Course.

LU: Mm-hmm. And what was that like?

DA: It's a funny thing. 'Cause we'd been separated 15 years, right? I guess he, he couldn't remember how his own wife looked like. So he goes and shake hands – "Who are you?" [laughter] We laughed.

LU: And so you went back and stayed with your father?

DA: Yep.

LU: And what did you do for a job?

DA: There was a Japanese company called Seabreeze. I worked there. I ended up in service department, and then after third year – well, I finished school, in the – after third years. I remember my dad, he used to say, "Don't look at the girl for 3 years." [laughter]

LU: And what – why did he say that? [laughter]

DA: Eh?

LU: Why did he say that?

DA: To study hard. To catch up on my English. Yeah.

LU: So where did you go to school to learn English?

DA: Bloor Collegiate.

LU: Blue Collegiate, and you also went to Ryerson?

DA: Ryerson, to learn – that time I heard television was coming up on the horizon, right? So I said I better take up on the TV, the television. Did that for three years.

LU: And what was it like going to school in Canada? What were the people like?

DA: They didn't bother me. It was okay. You know, and summertime – during the summer, I went to the U of T [University of Toronto] to learn English as I had a summer course. Yeah.

LU: Were there a lot of other Japanese in the English classes, as well, with you?

DA: No, mostly Europeans. Yeah. Yeah, and when – when I came back, I went to JCCA, Japanese Canadians Citizenship Association, 'cause they helped my dad bring us back, so I went there to thank them, and I met George and Kinzie Tanaka, two brothers. And then while I was there, I found out there's about 60 – no, 30-some odd returnees – they called us returnees, right? In Toronto, and looking for friends and something like that. So I said, "Okay." So I got the list. With another boy, I – we found everybody on the list and they said, "Let's have a meeting." So as soon as – George – we rented the University Settlement House on Grange Avenue, and had the first meeting, and then we decided to have – form a club called – called it the Kika-nisei¹ Club.

LU: And what did you discuss at these meetings?

DA: We got together once a month, and we always have a guest speaker, like – Kinzie always came. And then – another thing we did was learn dance, social dancing. So we had hired a teacher. Every Sunday afternoon we practiced dancing. And one summer day, we chartered a bus that went to Wasaga Beach. So that was nice. We had quite a bit of activities. Yeah.

LU: And did you discuss the Japanese Canadian community when you were at these meetings?

DA: Well – for that – like I said, Kinzie Tanaka came to explain it to us, right, how – yeah.

LU: So what, what did he explain to you? What life was like in Canada?

DA: Right. So that was one of the reasons we took up dancing. So we could mingle with them.

LU: And – would you say that religion was always a big part of your life? Religion? Being a Buddhist?

DA: Well, Japanese are born Buddhist, right?

LU: So you've always practiced, ever since you're younger?

DA: Right.

LU: Before even going to Japan?

DA: Ah, no. Not before. There was no such thing in Toronto. There was hardly any Japanese then. I think there was about 2 or 3 families, and all the rest were bachelors, single men. 'Cause even as – my – the place my dad worked, he was the only one who married. All the rest are bachelors, about 10 of them, and every weekend, they used to drop into our house. My mom used to refresh – serve them refreshments and they played [gaji], Japanese card games. You know?

¹ Canadian born nisei who were educated in Japan and returned to Canada

LU: So do you remember your parents practising Buddhism, before – when you were younger?

DA: No, actually I was in a Catholic school.

LU: Really?

DA: On Dupont Street.

LU: Until grade 3?

DA: Yeah.

LU: Until then, then you went to Japan. So when did you, yourself, start practising?

DA: So in Japan, since I had, you know, problem with the language itself – during the summer I remember going to a temple, to help me with the homework.

LU: And you started there.

DA: Yeah.

LU: And how would you say that affected the rest of your life?

DA: Well, I was married in a Buddhist temple. And that being – well then again, you see – I always remember, when my dad used to say – remember? “Don’t look at the girl for three years.” And he says, “When you’re young, keep taking – but when you reach a certain age, return back to the society.” Right? So when I turned – I think I was about 55, I really got involved with the church, Buddhist church in Toronto. ‘Til about a couple of years ago, I think, then I retired.

LU: So how long were you active with the Toronto Buddhist Church?

DA: Probably about 25 years. I served them with – in a different capacity.

LU: And what did you do there?

DA: What did I do? Well, let me see. I look after the da – Sunday school, as a supervisor, for 7 years. And I became a president and I served that as – 8 years, I guess. And after that, to build a new temple, I became the chairman for the fundraising. Did that for 5 years, and we built a temple without any debts.

LU: And you’re still active in the community today?

DA: No, when I turned 80 – actually – I lost my wife about two years and a half, right? Since then, I’ve been quiet. Just lately, I’m getting involved again, but –

LU: And where did you meet your wife?

DA: Through the club we had. I was the president, she was the secretary.

LU: And when did you get married?

DA: Right after the third year. [laughs] Right after I finished school.

LU: And tell me a little bit about your children?

DA: We had no problem with them. They all took piano lessons, ‘cause I had the – for a while I had a, a store, and we thought the best thing is to keep them at home, so by taking the piano lessons, they have to come home and practice, right?

LU: And how many children did you have?

DA: Four. Two boys and two girls. So they all took piano lessons.

LU: And when you’re raising them, where – where did you work? What was your career?

DA: I had my own business.

LU: And you were doing what for your own business?

DA: Television. First I had a store, oh – 3, 4 years I guess, and then my mom – mom passed away and then my – the kids start saying, you know, is it worth it? You know, to work so hard? So –

LU: So how did you run your TV show? Did you – you said you ran it in your house?

DA: Well, we had a store, and my wife ran the store. And we had a baby-sitter in the back there, helping the household, so – 'til my mom passed away.

LU: Did you find when you came back to Japan, or you know, when your children were growing up, that you encountered any racial prejudice at all, or discrimination?

DA: Well, no, not in Toronto. No, [I don't think]. Well, at that time – problem, we're the only family with kids, right? And since I was going to Catholic school, we had a uniform, like suits and ties. That was another reason – when we went back to Japan, I went to school and since I couldn't speak, they put me in grade 1, right? Instead of 3. So I became so famous among the girls because I had on suits and a necktie come to the school. [laughter] All these girls were chasing me. I remember that.

LU: What about your grandchildren? How many grandchildren do you have?

DA: 13.

LU: 13, and how are they?

DA: Good, good. I get along good with them.

LU: Now, I heard that you were active in the redress. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

DA: [shakes head] No, no.

LU: No? Not very much.

DA: No.

LU: Do you remember when the redress was occurring? How did you feel about it?

DA: No, I wasn't involved at all. That was Harry [Yanaka's?] involvement.

LU: Do you remember reading about it in the newspaper and –

DA: That's about it.

LU: – watching it on the news?

DA: That's about it.

LU: What are your feelings on the redress? Are you happy it occurred?

DA: Yeah, well, that's a proper thing. I appreciate the government, you know, did what they did.

LU: Have you returned to Japan after – after you initially came back with your mother?

DA: Have I returned to Japan?

LU: Have you been back since?

DA: Yeah, a few times. As a visit.

LU: So just vacation?

DA: Yeah.

LU: And did you visit any of your family when you were there?

DA: Yes, my cousin.

LU: And did your brothers and sister stay in Japan or did they come back to Canada as well, when you were younger?

DA: In 1949? We all came back.

LU: Everybody came back.

DA: Yeah.

LU: And they still live – they stayed in, in Canada? They didn't move back to Japan?

DA: No. They're still here, in Toronto.

LU: And why do you think you never returned to Japan?

DA: Well, I was born and, and raised here. And then – I guess because we were separated – well, let me see now. We came back in '49, right? We had some cousins – well, we did have one cousin in Tokyo. We used to correspond, and that's about it. But she passed away, and the one in Shiga-ken passed away, so.

LU: So it made more sense to stay here, in, in Toronto?

DA: And then, so when we went back last time, we – we dropped in and say hello but that was it, right?

LU: What are your feelings on the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre? Have you been a member for a long time?

DA: I guess I sat on the board one time, too.

LU: Do you feel that it is an important part of our community?

DA: I think so, yeah. Yeah.

LU: What kind of activities did you participate in for the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre?

DA: I'm a member of the Senior Citizens.

LU: And tell me a little bit about that?

DA: Senior Citizens, here? Wynford? Well, they've the get-together every other Wednesday, right, and then – mostly just to keep in touch, I guess, is the main thing.

LU: And do you know anybody who was also from Japan who was there during the war years as well, or were most people here in Canada during the war?

DA: No, I don't think there was any, that I could remember. [shakes head]

LU: What are your feelings about the Sedai project that we have?

DA: Sedai?

LU: Sedai project that we have?

DA: Oh, it's being called Sedai? Is that what's it called?

LU: Mm-hmm. So our project –

DA: Sedai, wow.

LU: Is preserving our Japanese Canadian history.

DA: Sedai –

LU: So that it is available to everybody – what do you think about the project?

DA: [reading] "To know is to share, via our website – of a unique history and experience of a Canadian –" So this is for the benefit of whom?

LU: For future generations.

DA: Future generations –

LU: And for anybody who is interested in learning about Japanese Canadian history.

DA: Mm-hmm.

LU: And for anybody who would like to learn.

DA: Okay. Well, at the church, on our 50th anniversary, we published a book. The history of the Buddhism in Canada, the movement, and now it's our 65th anniversary so we're writing a – a history since 50th anniversary.

LU: And do you think it's important that future generations learn about their Japanese Canadian history?

DA: I think so. Yeah, yeah. Well, they have to find out the roots, eh?

INL How important is it to you that your children and your grandchildren learn about your history?

DA: I keep reminding them, you know, the way they come from.

LU: What kind of stories do you tell them?

DA: Of course, you know, because of the hardships I went through during the war, they don't believe that because it's – they can't comprehend. It's unbelievable, right? So to them, it's – it's just a story, I guess.

LU: And what would you like them to learn about?

DA: Well, Japanese culture's important, you know. And like I said, the heritage. Because the Japanese are kind of a unique – aren't they? Compared to the other people. You know, 'cause first thing you hear is – when people go to Japan is – they says, "Boy, they are so polite." Right? So accommodating. Stuff like that. That's the uniqueness of the Japanese, I'm pretty sure.

LU: And do you find that you try to teach that to everybody?

DA: I think they learning from us through our actions. I don't think I have to tell them. I see that in my kids, especially the girls.

LU: How do you think that we can approach the younger generations to learn more about their Japanese Canadian history?

DA: I guess – through these and websites is okay. Movie's good.

LU: How can we get them more involved?

DA: In?

LU: In the Japanese Canadian community, and volunteering, and participating –

DA: That's hard because in a couple more generations there won't be any pure Japanese, right? Even, even our family, one of the boys got married to this *hakujin* girl. So before we knew, he went to her way. Even the church. He goes to Catholic Church now. So quite a bit of influence by the girls. So that's what I – what's going to happen when they – the third, fourth generation come, when they get married. So that's not a good part. That's a very sad situation. Right?

LU: I don't think I have any more questions for you.

DA: Good.

LU: Do you have anything else that you would like to share, or any other stories you want to share with us?

DA: Hmm. Only I didn't come prepared because I didn't know what [gestures in front of him] was going to be about, right?

LU: Was it difficult for your father to transport you back from Japan with your family? Did he have a hard time getting everybody back here?

DA: Well, that's what I said. The JCC helped him. Like, Kinzie Tanaka, you know.

LU: Okay. Well, I think that's it then.

DA: That's it. Okay.

LU: Thank you very much.

DA: You're welcome.

LU: We really appreciate this.

DA: I helped – if it's of any help to you.

LU: Of course, of course.

[End of interview]