

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



SEDAI 
PROJECT

THE JAPANESE CANADIAN LEGACY PROJECT

Lisa Uyeda: This one and we are all set. Great and so we are only going to asking first names. So, we are going to leave your last name, ok? So, this is an interview with David on June 16th, 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.

DA: Talk a little louder.

LU: Sorry, 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: And your parents were born in Japan. Can you tell us a little about where they were born?

DA: My dad was born in Kyushu, Kagoshima. And my mother was born in Shiga-ken?.

LU: And when did your parents come to Vancouver?

DA: I have no idea.

LU: No idea?

DA: Well, let's see. My older sister is 84. So it has to be- No, she's 86 now so it has to be just before that.

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

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

LU: 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? What do you remember about where you lived before the war?

DA: Of course, Toronto.

LU: So, you lived in Toronto.

DA: When I was eight, sent back to Japan.

LU: Ok.

DA: Because we were born in Toronto, we couldn't speak Japanese. So, it's hard to converse with our own parents, they decided we go back to Japan to learn Japanese.

LU: How long were you in Japan for?

DA: 15 years.

LU: 15 years.

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

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

DA: 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: A navy lab and what did you do there?

DA: Working on a secret mission.

LU: [laughing] So, tell us a little bit about life in Japan before, before the war happened. Do you remember much about it?

DA: Well, as I said, I was in school. Then, the war broke out. And course we had 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 in a lab and I worked in a lab. Eventually as I said, I was picked up by the navy to work in their lab until 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 would have, yeah, if we knew the war was coming.

LU: Who went to Japan with you?

DA: Mother.

LU: Your mother.

DA: And siblings.

LU: And your siblings. What did your father do when he stayed here?

DA: He worked for the CPR, Canadian Pacific Railway company in the roundhouse. Do you know what a roundhouse is? Well that time, they had no diesel. It was all steam engine. So, they needed a lot of repair. So, they build a roundhouse with a turntable in the center. They bring the train in, turn the turntable around to go into the proper garage.

LU: Oh. Ok.

DA: To maintain the machines.

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

DA: Well, correspondence.

LU: Did you hear from him a lot through letters?

DA: Mostly letters.

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

[5 minutes]

DA: Everything was cutoff soon as the war broke out and that was it.

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

DA: Well, I don't remember but I was busy, working. My mother lived with me, my older sister married, and two other brothers worked in two different companies.

LU: Ok.

DA: In 1944, I guess. In the summer of 1944, the Japanese navy lost a major war in the South Pacific, called the Midway. They lost all their ships and the tide of the war changed and the Americans started attacking us, right? I remember the first plane came over us 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. [unclear], they couldn't go up that high because he had no oxygen. They call it Flying Saucer, Flying- I can't remember now. They just flew over at their will. Once they found that out, every night they came over Japan in 1945.

LU: What was that like?

DA: During the day, they attacked the factories and stuff. In the nighttime, they attacked the civilians. The Japanese houses then, were built with paper and wood and no underground basement so it was just like putting a match to paper, right? They attacked every night, different cities. Our turn came on March the 15th.

LU: So, what did you do to stay safe?

DA: Well, I almost lost a life then cause I lived with my mother like I said. Next door, there was an old lady lived with her son but that night, her son was away on a business trip. So, when the sirens started, I went to see the next door to come out with us, right? She refused. She says, "No, I am waiting for her son to come home". By the time I finally got out onto the main street, we were surrounded by fire so I said, "well, this is it", right? Out of nowhere, another soldier came out and he saw us and said, go a certain way. We ended up in a park. So, after we were safe.

LU: So, was your house caught on fire?

DA: The whole city was gone.

LU: Everything was gone?

DA: This was just south of Tokyo, the southern part of Tokyo.

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: And what happened after that? So, you stayed in a dorm for a little while then what did you do?

DA: And then, the war ended August 15th. The section manager I worked for started his own business and then asked me to come and work for him. I went there. Then, he started making speakers and I was a designer for speakers. It was about high five [unclear]. We had to have room for large speakers with the lowest sound. We used a little speaker called [Tweeter?] for the higher ends of sound. The idea came out that why can't we make one speaker that produced both high- and low-end sound, right? I worked on that. I think I am the first one who designed the first oversized speaker. It's called oversized, egg-shaped. And then a new building was built. I was made in charge of the production. Then, I called my mother to live with me, called two other brothers to help. That was the first time the whole family came together.

[10 minutes]

LU: And what was that like?

DA: Was nice. Had to control the whole thing, the operation. I think about twenty, twenty-two.

LU: When did you decide to come back to Canada?

DA: Of course by then, correspondence was re-established. We started getting letters from our father telling us to come back to Canada. Because of the position I had, I said, "I didn't want to go back". Mom says, if I didn't go, she wouldn't have gone, gone back to Canada. I said, "I'll come back too". It was like 1949, sometime in May. Landed in Toronto June the 3rd, my birthday.

LU: Ah, good day. And was your father there waiting for you?

DA: Course.

LU: And what was that like?

DA: It was a funny thing. We had been separated 15 years, right? He couldn't remember how his own wife looked like. He goes and says, "Who are you?"
[laughing] We laughed.

LU: And so, you went back and stayed with your father. And what did you do for a job?

DA: Um, there was a Japanese company called [CBreeze?]. I worked there, I ended up in a service department. Then after third year, I finished school after three years. I remember my dad used to say, "Don't look at a girl for three years". [laughing]

LU: Why did he say that?

DA: [laughing]

LU: Why did he say that?

DA: To study hard, to catch up on my English.

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

DA: [unclear] collegiate.

LU: [unclear] collegiate and you also went to Ryerson?

DA: And I also went to Ryerson to learn. At that time, I heard television was coming up. I better do tv and 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. During summertime, I went to U of T [University of Toronto] to learn English as I had a summer course.

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

DA: No, mostly Europeans. When I came back, I went to JCCA, Japanese Canadian Citizenship Association, cause they helped my dad bring us back. So, I went there to thank them and met [Jorge?] and [Kenji Tanaka?], two brothers. While I was there, I found out there were 30 some odd returnees, returnees they call us, in Toronto looking for friends or something like that so I said okay. I got the list and with another boy. We phone everybody on the list and we said, "Let's have a meeting". Through the [Jorge?], we rented the university settlement house on [unclear] Avenue and had first meeting and we decided to form a club called [Junisei?] club.

LU: And what did you discuss at these meetings?

DA: We got together once a month and we always had a guest speaker. [Kenji?] always came. The other thing we did was learn dance, social dancing. So, we hired a teacher. Every Sunday afternoon, we would practice dancing. One summer day, we chartered a bus that went to Wasaga Beach. So, it was nice. We had quite a bit of activities.

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

DA: Well, for that, like I said, [Kenji Tanaka?] came to explain it to us, right?

[15 minutes]

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

DA: Right. 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: Japanese are born Buddhist.

LU: So, you have always practiced since you were younger?

DA: Right.

LU: Before even going to Japan?

DA: No, not before. There was no such thing in Toronto. Hardly any Japanese then. I think two or three families and the rest are all bachelors, single men. In the place my dad worked, he was the only one married. All the rest are bachelors, about ten of them and every weekend, they used to drop into our house. My mom used to serve them refreshments and they would play [gaji?], Japanese card games.

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

DA: Actually, I was in the Catholic school.

LU: Really?

DA: On Dupont Street.

LU: Until grade three? And then you went to Japan? So, when did you yourself start practicing?

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

LU: And you started there?

DA: Yep.

LU: How would you say it affected the rest of your life?

DA: I was married in a Buddhist temple. I always remember what my dad used to say, "Don't look at a girl for three years". And he says, "When you are young, keep taking. When you reach a certain age, return back to the society", right? So, when I turned about 55, I really got involved with a Buddhist church in Toronto until a couple years ago. I think then that I retired.

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

DA: Probably about 25 years.

LU: 25 years.

DA: I served them with a different capacity.

LU: And what did you do there?

DA: What did I do? Well, let me see. I looked after the Sunday school as a supervisor for seven years. Then, I became a President and served for eight years. Then after that, to build a new temple, I became the Chairman for the fundraising, did that for five years. They built a temple without any debts.

LU: And you are still active in the community today?

DA: Uh no, when I turned 80- I lost my wife three years and a half. Since then, I've been quiet. Just lately, I'm getting involved again.

LU: And where did you meet your wife?

DA: Through that club.

LU: Through the club.

DA: I was president, she was secretary.

LU: And when did you get married?

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

LU: Tell me a little bit about your children.

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

LU: How many children did you have?

DA: Four.

LU: Four.

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

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

DA: Had my own business.

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

DA: Television.

LU: Television.

DA: First, I had a store. Oh, three or four years, I guess. Then, my mom passed away. Then the kids started saying, "Is it worth it to work so hard?"

[20 minutes]

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

DA: We had a store. My wife ran the store. We had a babysitter in the back helping the household till my mom passed away.

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

DA: No, not in Toronto. I don't think. That time, probably the only family were the kids and since I was going to Catholic school, we had uniform suits and tie. That was the reason when we went back to Japan, I went to school and since I couldn't speak, they put me in grade one instead of three. I became so famous among the girls because I had on a suit and necktie. [laughing] All these girls were chasing.

LU: [laughing]

DA: I remember that.

LU: And, what about your grandchildren, how many do you have?

DA: 13.

LU: 13 and how are they?

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

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

DA: No, not very much.

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

DA: I wasn't involved at all. [unclear]'s involvement.

LU: Do you remember reading about it in the newspaper and watching it on the news?

DA: That's about it. That's about it.

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

DA: Yeah, think so. That's a proper thing. I appreciate the government did what they did.

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

DA: Have I returned to Japan?

LU: Yeah, have you been back since?

DA: A few times, as a visit.

LU: So just vacation?

DA: Yeah.

LU: Did you visit any of your family when there?

DA: Yes, my cousin.

LU: 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. They stayed in Canada and didn't move back to Japan?

DA: They still here, in Toronto.

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

DA: Well, I was born and raised here and then, I guess because we were separated for a while- Let me see now, we came back in '49, right? We had some cousins. We did have one cousin in Tokyo we used to correspond and that's about it until she passed away and the one in [Shigaken] passed away.

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

DA: So, when we went back last time, we drop in to say hello and that was it.

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 the community?

DA: I think so. Yeah.

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

DA: Member of the Senior Citizen.

LU: Tell me a little about that.

DA: Senior citizens here, they get together every other Wednesday and they 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?

[25 minutes]

DA: I don't think there's any that I could remember.

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

DA: Sedai?

LU: The Sedai project that we have?

DA: Oh, you call it Sedai?

LU: Yep.

DA: Sedai, wow.

LU: Our project is preserving our Japanese Canadian history.

DA: Sedai.

LU: So, then it is available to everybody. What do you think about the project?

DA: Goal is to share via a website of experience of [unclear]. So, this is for the benefit of whom?

LU: For future generations and for everybody who is interested about learning about Japanese Canadian history and for anybody who would like to learn.

DA: At the church on our 50th anniversary, we published a book, The History of Buddhism in Canada and now, it's our 65th anniversary so we are writing a- since 50th anniversary.

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

DA: Yeah, I think so. Well, they have to find out their roots.

LU: How important is it to you that your children and your grandchildren learn about their history?

DA: I keep reminding them, where they come from.

LU: What kind of stories do you tell them?

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

LU: What would you like them to learn about?

DA: Japanese culture is important. I would like to say the heritage. Cause Japanese are kind of unique, aren't they, compared to the other people. Yeah, first thing you hear when people go to Japan is, "Boy, they are so polite, so accommodating." That's the uniqueness of the Japanese.

LU: Do you find that you try to teach that to everybody?

DA: I think they are 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. Website is okay, movie is good.

LU: How can we get them more involved? How can we get them more involved in the Japanese Canadian community, volunteering and participating?

DA: That's hard because in a couple more generations, there won't be any true Japanese, right? Even in our family, one of our boys got married to a hakuji girl. Before we knew, he went her way. Even at church, they go to a Catholic Church now. So that's what's going to happen with third, fourth generation to come, when they get married. That's not the good part, that's a very sad situation, right?

LU: I don't think I have any more questions for you. Do you have anything else you would like to share or any stories you would like to share with us?

[30 minutes]

DA: I didn't come prepared since I didn't know what it was going to be about.

LU: How was it difficult for your father to transport you back from Japan with your family? Did he have a hard time getting everyone back there?

DA: That's what I said. The JCCA [Japanese Canadian Citizenship Association] helped him, like [Kenji Tanaka?].

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

DA: That's it?

LU: Thank you very much, we really appreciate this.

DA: If it was any help to you.

LU: Of course, of course.

[Interview ends]