

From Exile to Return: The Postwar Repatriation and Resettlement of Japanese Canadians

By Gemini Deep Research, September 10, 2026
Edited by Takashi Ohki

Introduction

Between May and December 1946, the Canadian government carried out the state-directed expulsion of 3,964 individuals of Japanese ancestry to war-devastated Japan¹. Framed by federal authorities as "voluntary repatriation," this policy was the culmination of wartime dispossession, indefinite internment, and disenfranchisement directed against a population that had committed no acts of espionage or sabotage¹. Over half of those exiled were Canadian-born citizens, many of whom had never set foot in Japan².

Despite statutory bans on re-entry, the cancellation of naturalized status, and the denial of state-assisted travel, an estimated 25 to 50 percent of these exiled Nikkei returned to Canada between the late 1940s and late 1960s¹. State restitution did not facilitate their return; instead, they pursued legal petitions for the "clarification of citizenship," capital accumulation through employment with Allied occupation forces, private and family sponsorship agreements, and academic or vocational routes through third countries³.

The Coercive Framework of Postwar "Repatriation"

The expulsion of Japanese Canadians was authorized under the sweeping emergency powers of the *War Measures Act* and extended into peacetime through the *National Emergency Transitional Powers Act*⁶. In the spring of 1945, the federal government subjected all interned Japanese Canadians aged sixteen and older to a coercive survey¹. Faced with continuing detention and barred from returning to their homes within the protected coastal zone of British Columbia, internees were offered an ultimatum: disperse east of the Rocky Mountains into unfamiliar communities or sign declarations requesting "repatriation" to Japan².

Federal officials treated the signing of a repatriation form as *prima facie* evidence of national disloyalty¹. In reality, the decision was driven by poverty, family preservation, and anger at state-sanctioned mistreatment¹. The federal Custodian of Enemy Property had already auctioned off the community's farms, businesses, homes, fishing vessels, and personal belongings without their consent, leaving many families without financial resources¹. For elderly first-generation immigrants (*Issei*), many of whom spoke limited English, the prospect of starting over in hostile eastern provinces seemed impossible¹. Second-generation Canadian-born youths (*Nisei*) were compelled by filial duty to accompany aging, ill, or dependent parents into exile¹.

In December 1945, the administration of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King passed three federal orders-in-council—Privy Council Orders P.C. 7355, 7356, and 7357—authorizing the forced deportation of Japanese nationals, naturalized British subjects, and Canadian-born Nikkei who had not revoked their signatures before the arbitrary deadlines¹. Under P.C. 7356, naturalized subjects who were deported were formally stripped of their Canadian citizenship upon departure¹.

Demographic Cohort	Number of Individuals	Percentage of Exiles	Legal Status under Expulsion Orders
Canadian-Born (Nisei) under 16	1,308	33.0%	Minors accompanying parents; retained latent <i>jus soli</i> birthright rights ² .
Canadian-Born (Nisei) 16 and older	713	18.0%	Canadian citizens by birth; pressured to renounce allegiance upon departure ² .
Naturalized Canadian Citizens	595	15.0%	Stripped of British subject and Canadian status under P.C. 7356 ¹ .
Japanese Nationals (Issei)	1,348	34.0%	Classified as enemy aliens subject to summary deportation ² .
Total Exiled Population	3,964	100.0%	66% were Commonwealth citizens by birth or naturalization ² .

Although sustained legal challenges spearheaded by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians and broader public protest prompted the King government to cancel remaining deportation orders on January 24, 1947, the repeal came too late for the nearly 4,000 individuals who had already departed aboard five United States military transport ships².

Disillusionment and Survival in Occupied Japan

The exiled Nikkei arrived in a defeated nation crippled by infrastructure collapse, hyperinflation, and food shortages¹. Major urban centers such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Hiroshima were in ruins, and the population faced strict rations¹. Exiles were routed through the reception barracks at Uruga and Kurihama in Tokyo Bay, where hungry residents asked for leftover rations before they boarded crowded trains to their families' ancestral agricultural villages in prefectures such as Hiroshima, Fukuoka, Kagoshima, and Wakayama².

In their ancestral villages, returnees faced severe social and cultural alienation¹³. Canadian-born Nisei, educated in English and acculturated to Canadian society, were treated as foreign outsiders (*gaijin*)¹³. Their limited Japanese language skills, unfamiliar Western manners, and Canadian accents made it difficult to secure work or adapt to local schools³. Impoverished rural relatives, already struggling under wartime hardships, often viewed the exiled families as financial burdens³. Compounding these survival challenges, the Canadian government banned international financial remittances to Japan until 1949, preventing relatives who had remained in Canada from sending aid¹³. Because naturalized family heads had their property seized and were paid only nominal sums

upon departure, their funds were quickly depleted by postwar inflation¹. These conditions made it clear to many Nisei that their stay in Japan was an involuntary dislocation rather than a permanent return, creating a collective determination to find a way back to Canada¹³.

Pathways and Mechanisms of Return

Re-entering Canada was a difficult bureaucratic and financial challenge³. Because the federal government considered their departure permanent, it established no state programs or funding to help displaced residents return¹. Exiled Nikkei had to navigate shifting consular regulations, overcome legal hurdles, and finance their passage across the Pacific independently³.

Pathway Mechanism	Target Demographic	Legal and Administrative Requirements	Primary Barriers Encountered
Clarification of Citizenship	Canadian-born Nisei (<i>jus soli</i>) ³ .	In-person application at Tokyo Embassy; submission of BC birth records and camp IDs ³ .	Stringent identity vetting; zero state travel assistance provided ³ .
SCAP Military Employment	Bilingual Nisei youths and adults ³ .	English proficiency testing; employment as interpreters, typists, or supply clerks ³ .	Occupational hazards; reliance on military scrip to purchase transpacific passage ³ .
Private Family Sponsorship	Disfranchised Issei and naturalized Nikkei ³ .	Canadian resident sponsor; guarantees of employment, housing, and financial maintenance ³ .	High domestic income thresholds for sponsors; processing backlogs ³ .
Third-Country Academic Route	Highly skilled or professional Nisei ¹ .	Visas for professional training in the United States; cross-border institutional transfers ¹ .	U.S. racial immigration quotas; costly foreign university tuitions ⁸ .

Consular Vetting and the "Clarification of Citizenship"

The primary legal pathway for Canadian-born Nisei was the "clarification of Canadian citizenship,"

managed through the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo³. After the passage of the Canadian Citizenship Act in 1946 (which took effect on January 1, 1947) and the removal of travel restrictions on Japanese Canadians on April 1, 1949, Ottawa conceded that Canadian-born Nisei could not be permanently deprived of their birthright status simply by accompanying their parents to Japan³. To re-establish their legal identity, applicants had to travel to Tokyo and submit extensive evidence to Canadian immigration officials³. Requirements included:

- Provincial birth certificates verifying birth in Canada³.
- British Columbia Security Commission identity cards and internment registry numbers¹.
- Formal affidavits explaining that their wartime signature on repatriation forms had been given under duress, parental pressure, or operational coercion¹.

Once consular investigators cleared them, applicants received Canadian passports, confirming their status as Canadian citizens and allowing them to re-enter the country without an immigration quota³.

The Financial Double Standard

The administrative process revealed a clear institutional double standard in postwar Canadian foreign policy³. Canadian citizens of European origin—such as German Canadians and Italian Canadians who had spent the war years in enemy territory—were provided government-funded emergency repatriation, including state-funded steamship passage and subsistence loans if they were found destitute³.

In contrast, the Canadian government refused to provide any financial aid or travel subsidies to returning Japanese Canadians³. Exiles were required to independently cover the full cost of commercial ocean or air travel, consular processing fees, and mandatory medical examinations³. This policy created a high barrier that left many eligible Canadian citizens stranded in Japan for years, forcing families to stagger their returns across decades³.

Employment with Allied Occupation Forces (SCAP)

To overcome these financial barriers, many Nisei used their bilingualism to work for the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP)³. The American and Commonwealth occupation apparatus required thousands of personnel who could speak fluent English while understanding Japanese social norms³.

Nisei men and women were hired as interpreters for Allied military intelligence, court reporters for war crimes trials, translators for military governors, and typists and logistical coordinators for occupation offices³. When the Korean War began in 1950, Allied supply infrastructure expanded rapidly, and thousands of Canadian and Commonwealth soldiers were stationed at supply depots such as Kure and administrative offices in Tokyo¹⁷. This military buildup created steady employment for Canadian-born Nikkei⁷. These positions paid higher wages than the domestic Japanese economy and provided access to American currency and occupation scrip, allowing exiles to save the funds needed to buy transpacific passage home³.

Private Sponsorship and Domestic Contract Networks

For first-generation Issei, naturalized citizens whose status had been revoked under P.C. 7356, and youths lacking documentation, the citizenship clarification route was unavailable¹. Re-entry required formal sponsorship by family members, religious bodies, or private employers already living in Canada³.

Sponsorship rules required Canadian sponsors to prove they could house and support the immigrants so they would not become a financial burden on the state³. In many cases, Nisei children who had secured their own citizenship returned to Canada first, found employment, and then submitted formal sponsorship applications for their aging parents and younger siblings³. Outside of family circles, returning Japanese Canadians were often sponsored through farm labour contracts, church-sponsored domestic service placements, and arrangements coordinated by community organizations such as the National Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association (NJCCA)⁷.

Sponsorship by Leaver Mushrooms in Ontario

Leaver Mushrooms (later known as Leaver Mushrooms Co. Ltd., founded by Ernest Leaver) in Campbellville, Ontario, began hiring repatriated/deported Japanese Canadians in 1951. In the next decade or so, the company sponsored about 200 deported Japanese Canadians and acted as a hub for deported Japanese Canadians to return to Canada²⁹.

In the early postwar period, Southern Ontario's expanding commercial mushroom industry faced chronic labour shortages. Harvesting and packing mushrooms required intensive, reliable manual work. In 1951, the Canadian government eased entry restrictions, allowing individuals stripped of Canadian citizenship or displaced during the postwar "repatriation" to re-immigrate, provided they had guaranteed employment and sponsorship.

Ernest Leaver and his farm management arranged group sponsorships through immigration channels and community networks. The first contingent of returnees from Japan arrived to work at the Campbellville plant in 1951. Over the following decade, Leaver Mushrooms became one of the primary landing hubs in eastern Canada for Japanese Canadian returnees rebuilding their lives.

Leaver asked Toshitsugu (Ted) Nishi, a Japanese Canadian mushroom grower, to help him arrange sponsorship for deported Japanese Canadians and transport them from Japan to Ontario. The recruits agreed to a multi-year (typically three years) repayment plan, gradually repaying their travel advances of \$365 through regular monthly payroll deductions.

Leaver established on-site dormitories and kitchen facilities for the workers. Because local diets were initially catered to Portuguese tastes, community liaisons helped adjust conditions (including kitchen food arrangements) so the workers could settle in comfortably. For many young men, the farm served as an initial economic foothold in Ontario before they completed their contracts and transitioned into other industries or settled permanently in the Greater Toronto Area.

Documented Stories of Return

The experiences of returning exiles illustrate the systemic obstacles they faced, the strategies they used to re-enter the country, and the deep disruption to their families caused by forced expulsion³.

Dr. Henry Shibata: The Academic and Third Country Gateway

Born in Vancouver, Henry Shibata was interned with his family in the mining town of Slocan City, British Columbia¹. His father, an Issei whose commercial properties had been seized and liquidated, decided to take the family to Japan in 1946¹. Arriving in a devastated Hiroshima aboard the SS *General Meigs*, the Shibata family lived in poverty while Henry earned admission to the Hiroshima University School of Medicine¹.

Shibata's return to North America was made possible by his aunt, an influential Tenrikyo leader living in Seattle⁸. She mailed him American medical textbooks throughout his university studies and eventually purchased his ticket on a commercial cargo freighter from Yokohama to Seattle⁸. After arriving in the United States, Shibata spent four years in Beverly, Massachusetts, completing a surgical residency¹.

When American immigration officials told him he could only adjust his visa status by applying under the restricted Japanese national quota—ignoring his Canadian birth—Shibata refused to accept the classification⁸. Asserting his Canadian citizenship, he left the United States in 1961 to take a clinical and research position at McGill University and the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal¹. Shibata became an esteemed surgical oncologist, professor emeritus of surgery, and a prominent voice in the movement for historical redress¹.

Irene Tsuyuki: Private Sponsorship and Reconstituted Roots

Irene Tsuyuki (née Kato) was a teenager living in Vancouver's Powell Street neighborhood when the Canadian government ordered the removal of all Japanese residents¹⁶. Her family was interned at the Tashme camp in the Cascade Mountains¹⁶. In 1946, her family chose deportation to Japan largely because of her father's severe diabetes, believing he would not survive the harsh winters of eastern Canada⁹.

In Japan, her father's health stabilized, but Irene struggled to adjust⁹. She found employment in local commerce but felt alienated by traditional corporate hierarchies and social customs⁹. Feeling like an outsider, she looked for a way back to Canada⁹.

She contacted a prewar family friend in British Columbia who agreed to act as her legal sponsor, guaranteeing her housing and financial support⁹. With this sponsorship approved, Tsuyuki was able to secure travel permits and return across the Pacific⁹. She resettled in the Vancouver area and later married one of her sponsor's sons⁹. Her journey became the subject of Linda Ohama's documentary film, *Watari Dori: A Bird of Passage*, reflecting the broader experiences of young Nisei forced into exile and working to rebuild their lives in Canada⁹.

Yukiharu (Yuki) Mizuyabu: Military Interpretation and Consular Resistance

Yukiharu Mizuyabu used his bilingual skills to work as an interpreter for the United States military in occupied Okinawa through much of the 1950s⁷. Through his military employment, Mizuyabu saved his earnings in stable American currency while monitoring changes in Canadian immigration policy³.

When he applied for the clarification of his citizenship at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo, Mizuyabu openly criticized the discriminatory treatment he encountered³. He challenged consular officials on why European-born Canadian citizens were provided state funds to return home, while Canadian-born Nikkei were denied any financial assistance³. Relying entirely on his own military savings, Mizuyabu secured his Canadian passport and returned to Canada in 1961, where he settled in Ontario and became an active voice in documenting the experiences of the exiled Nikkei³.

Roy Uyeda: Allied Base Logistics and Independent Repatriation

Roy Uyeda was interned as a youth in the interior of British Columbia before being placed aboard an exile ship in 1946³. After landing at Uraga, Uyeda moved through the devastated landscape to southern Japan, eventually finding work at Tsuiki Air Base in Kyushu³.

Working as an interpreter and liaison officer alongside American military personnel, Uyeda managed daily logistics, supply requisitions, and communications between occupation personnel and local Japanese workers³. Using the money he saved from his military employment, Uyeda was able to purchase his own commercial passage back to British Columbia, eventually resettling in Vancouver³. His personal photographs and oral testimonies helped preserve the history of Japanese Canadians who served the Allied occupation while working to reverse their own deportations²².

Yoshimi Susan Maikawa: Family Resilience and Transpacific Aid Networks

Yoshimi Susan Maikawa (née Suyama), who was born in Cumberland on Vancouver Island, was interned at Lemon Creek before being exiled to Japan alongside her family³. In her memoir, *Ba-chan's Story*, Maikawa explained that her family agreed to leave Canada because their savings were gone, their property had been sold off, and racial barriers severely limited educational and professional opportunities for their children³.

In postwar Japan, the family struggled with malnutrition, cold winters, and inadequate healthcare³. When her sister contracted a life-threatening illness, her life was saved only because relatives remaining in Canada mailed modern antibiotics and medical supplies that could not be bought in Japan³.

By coordinating with family members across the ocean, saving small amounts of money, and confirming their Canadian birthright status, Maikawa and her family returned to Canada³. Her subsequent writings provided important firsthand accounts of the difficult choices forced upon Nikkei families and the long process of rebuilding their lives in Canada²⁵.

The Mochizuki and Eto Families: Phased Chain Returns

Because few families could afford multiple transpacific tickets at once, many households were forced to use a phased return strategy³. In the Mochizuki family, Kikuye Mochizuki Komori and her brother Yoshio worked to save enough money to buy two individual tickets back to Canada in the 1950s³. Their parents and two sisters could not raise the necessary funds and had begun building lives locally, leading them to remain permanently in Japan³.

The Eto family used a similar approach: Margaret Eto returned to Canada on her own in the early

1950s, using her initial wages to secure housing, build savings, and obtain legal sponsorship³. In 1958, after years of separation, she was able to bring her mother, Yasue Eto, and her younger sisters, Akemi and Naomi, back across the Pacific³. These phased chain returns permanently split many family networks, leaving some members in Canada and others in Japan³.

Long-Term Resettlement and Constitutional Redress

The Japanese Canadians who returned in the 1950s and 1960s came back to a country that was gradually modernizing its legal framework³. On April 1, 1949, the federal government allowed its wartime exclusion orders to expire, restoring full freedom of movement to Japanese Canadians and allowing them to return to the Pacific coast¹⁰. Around the same time, provincial and federal voting franchises were extended to Asian Canadians¹⁰.

However, returnees found that their prewar communities had vanished⁶. Historic ethnic centers—such as the Powell Street community in Vancouver and coastal fishing settlements like Steveston—had been broken up by forced sales and resettlement⁶. Most returnees settled in major urban centers across central and eastern Canada, particularly Toronto, Hamilton, and Montreal, where relatives had moved during the wartime dispersal program⁸. They faced the challenge of rebuilding careers, buying homes, and raising families without the savings or assets confiscated during the war¹.

The history of the 1946 expulsion became a key focus of the Japanese Canadian Redress movement in the 1970s and 1980s, organized by the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC)⁵. The Canadian government had long maintained that the departure of nearly 4,000 individuals was entirely voluntary¹. Community leaders, historians, and legal advocates systematically disproved this claim, demonstrating that the program was an unconstitutional campaign of forced deportation carried out against citizens and legal residents¹.

On September 22, 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney delivered a formal apology in the House of Commons on behalf of the Government of Canada. The Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement provided:

- A direct compensation payment of \$21,000 to each surviving internee, including exiles who had remained in Japan³.
- The formal restoration of Canadian citizenship to all living individuals and descendants who had been wrongfully stripped of their status or expelled between 1942 and 1949⁵.
- Formal pardons for individuals convicted under wartime curfew and security regulations⁵.
- A \$12 million community fund to support cultural and educational initiatives, alongside a \$24 million endowment to establish the Canadian Race Relations Foundation⁵.

The successful return of exiled Japanese Canadians stands as a clear example of individual and community resilience². Without official assistance and facing discriminatory barriers, returnees used their bilingual skills, built mutual-aid networks across the Pacific, pursued cross-border training, and asserted their constitutional right to birthright citizenship³. Their efforts not only reunited fractured families but also helped dismantle Canada's racially restrictive immigration laws and strengthen citizenship protections in modern Canadian law¹.

Works cited

1. A deportation ledger and the story of a Japanese Canadian deportee, <https://thediscoverblog.com/2018/09/17/a-deportation-ledger-and-the-story-of-a-japanese-canadian-deportee/>
2. Uprooted Again - greenwood, <https://www.greenwoodnikkei.ca/Uprooted-Again.html>
3. The forgotten Exiles - Legion Magazine, <https://legionmagazine.com/the-forgotten-exiles/>
4. Forced Relocation: the Japanese-Canadian Story, https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/chrono/1931forced_e.html
5. Japanese Canadian internment and the struggle for redress | CMHR, <https://humanrights.ca/story/japanese-canadian-internment-and-struggle-redress>
6. Background - greenwood, <https://www.greenwoodnikkei.ca/Background.html>
7. Chapter 2 Our Expulsion Stories - Toronto NAJC, <https://torontonajc.ca/torontostory/chapter2.html>
8. Henry Shibata, interviewed by Josh Labove, 29 February 2016, https://loi.uvic.ca/archive/oral_history_shib28_2016-02-29.html?ref=cust3
9. Irene Tsuyuki - Vancouver Public Library | BiblioCommons, <https://vpl.bibliocommons.com/v2/record/S38C1991654>
10. Japanese Canadian History - NAJC, <https://najc.ca/japanese-canadian-history/>
11. Guide on Anti-Asian Racism: Asian Canadian History, <https://east.library.utoronto.ca/resources/guide-anti-asian-racism>
12. John Price: The final straw - Pancouver, <https://pancouver.ca/john-price-the-final-straw/>
13. "Evangelines of 1946:" The Exile of Nikkei from Canada to Occupied, <https://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/obj/thesesCanada/vol2/002/MR82549.PDF>
14. Citizenship: Nothing Yet Everything - Active History, <https://activehistory.ca/blog/2012/11/27/citizenship-nothing-yet-everything/>
15. Author Interview: Lynne Kutsukake [in Bloom] - BookDragon, <https://apa.si.edu/bookdragon/author-interfilynn-kutsukake/>
16. IRENE TSUYUKI - YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8CWZ3NhrRE>
17. The Canadian Military Presence in Japan during the Korean War, https://scholars.wlu.ca/context/cmh/article/2148/viewcontent/CMH_32_2_Pass.pdf
18. Internment of Japanese Canadians - The Critical Thinking Consortium, <https://tc2.ca/products/japanese-internment>
19. Films | Linda Ohama, <https://www.ohamalinda.com/films>
20. A Scattering of Seeds Episodes — White Pine Pictures, <https://www.whitepinepictures.com/a-scattering-of-seeds/episodes>
21. Exile: The Forced Deportation of Japanese Canadians, <https://japanesecanadianhistory.com/lesson/exile-the-forced-deportation-of-japanese-canadians/>
22. Kage Tatsuo - ABC BookWorld, <https://abcbookworld.com/writer/kage-tatsuo/>
23. Nikkei 日系, https://centre.nikkeiplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Nikkei-exhibit-brochure_E.pdf
24. Intimate archives : Japanese-Canadian family photography 1939-1949, <https://scispace.com/pdf/intimate-archives-japanese-canadian-family-photography-1939-2qojtcrr8z.pdf>
25. Bachan's Story, <https://media.discovernikkei.org/articles/3424/BachansStory.pdf>
26. The final straw: Japanese Canadians offered an impossible choice, <https://www.timescolonist.com/islander/the-final-straw-japanese-canadians-offered-an-impossible-choice-4677610>
27. NIKKEI IMAGES, <https://centre.nikkeiplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2014-Volume-19-No.1.pdf>
28. Sedai – Toshitsugu (Ted) Nishi – Mushroom Farming in Ontario.mp4

https://jccc.on.ca/sedai-catalogue/2010015/interview-ted-toshitsugu-nishi?utm_source=copilot.com