

The Outside War

By Genevieve Fuji Johnson

1

In 1941, I remember how the beautiful, bright greens of summer changed gradually into a dull rainy autumn, and almost before I knew it, winter arrived on our doorstep. Then, on that fateful seventh day of December, 1941, the distant war brought to our community a sense of despair and hopelessness we had not felt so strongly before.

...

Next day was work as usual until the mill's manager, Mr. McGee, told us the company may fire all workers of Japanese descent. We were shocked at his news, but he and Scottie the foreman later suggested they would try to keep us employed for as long as possible since they couldn't afford to let go of such highly skilled workers. So they just asked us to work as usual.

December 16, 1942

This is our first Ontario winter "experience," and it is just brutal! On December 13, the temperature dropped below minus sixty degrees, but we still had to take turns working! There are many jobs which must be done, and a lot of us are returning with frozen fingers, toes, noses and ears! Icicles hanging from nose and chin! More than 150 of us have to work, and some of the men are being so badly exposed, they are being hospitalized.

February 22, 1943

Temperatures of minus fifty, and howling winds refuse to relent. Blowing sand stings our faces and fingers stick to the doorknob as we struggle into the dining hall! I sympathize with the eight men in detention who have to go outside to work each day. It's inhumane

punishment for refusing to sign some forms! We are trying to keep busy indoors, and we have started to watch movies twice a week. The Geneva Convention stipulated the first movie was free, but we must pay \$4.80 from our canteen for the second movie.

December 13, 1943

The six men ordered on Nov. 24 to participate in the Conscription were again approached by Mr. Hallorman to sign Unemployment Insurance forms and other papers. They were sent back unsigned on Dec. 10, and on Dec. 11, the men were ordered to undergo a physical check-up for the Conscription, but they refused to participate.

...

The six men were penalized with ten days in detention. The outside temperature is falling below minus forty degrees, and all of us know how cold the holding cells get. We can only sympathize and feel so very sorry for our six internees as they suffer on our behalf (M. Ikoma, N. Kamisori, M. Kokubo, I. Ohkata, M. Onodera, E. Yoshikuni)

January 15, 1944

An official statement from the Department of National Defense, Army, signed by Lt.-Col. Machum states that, beginning on January 17, men from each hut must cut wood for camp fuel every day. The all-day work is compulsory. In a hastily organized meeting, our Isseis stated that, because they are true P.O.W.'s and under Geneva convention regulations, they will not comply as it is the ruling government's responsibility to provide the necessities of life. We Niseis unanimously agreed to disobey the policy... Since it was the government who decided to split apart our families and confine us, then I say let the government cut their own wood!

Robert K. Okazaki, *The Nisei Mass Evacuation Group and P.O.W. Camp 101: the Japanese-Canadian Community's Struggle for Justice and Human Rights during World War II*, translated by Curtis T Okazaki and Jean M Okazaki (Scarborough, Ontario: R.K. Okazaki, 1996): 1, 56, 62, 78, 100.

2

Beautiful, bright greens of summer changed
Before I knew it, winter arrived
That seventh day, the distant war brought despair

They cannot afford to let us go
They ask us to work, as usual

Howling winds refusing to relent
Stinging faces, burning fingers
The first movie was free. We paid for the second

The six men were ordered. They refused
The six men were penalized. Ten days
All of us know how cold the holding cells get

We Niseis agree to disobey
The government split apart our families
Let the government cut their own wood!

3

All of us know how cold the holding cells get. Yet, we were defiant
Northern winds blister our faces. On our backs a sun blazes, in defiance

Once we fished, farmed, and raised our families. Then they split us apart
We will never split their wood even as we are punished for days, in defiance

Bachan's calla lilies bloom strong. Dry earth, tall stalks reaching from bulbs
I kept from the cold to live again in the spring, always in defiance