

My Reflection: Forgiveness -- A Gift from my Grandparents by Mark Sakamoto

“Breaking down is the easy part. Anyone, at any time, can break down. The act of coming together is what makes a hero. Moving on, with an open heart, seems, at times, impossible. But it’s not.” [p.182]

The Book

This book is a story about family and forgiveness. A family that is made up of damaged people. A family that practiced forgiveness in order to move on. Each in their own way, the characters in the story tried to find ways to break through and to move on.

The Places

Ralph Maclean, one of the protagonists of the book, hails from Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Quebec (the Magdalen Islands). It is a quiet, picturesque, and windswept island chain in the middle of the Gulf of St Lawrence, a 5-hour ferry ride from Souris, PEI. In July, 2018, I made a long trek from Kitchener, Ontario to this remote place and spent several glorious days there. On the northern tip of the thin island chain sits Grosse-Îles, a tiny English speaking community that numbers about 400 today. In the fall of 1941, two Canadian battalions were sent to defend Hong Kong. One of them was the Royal Rifles of Canada from Quebec and Ralph Maclean, along with a number of young men from the Magdalen Islands, was part of the contingent.

Ralph Maclean spent most of the war years as a POW in Stanley, Hong Kong. When I was growing up in Hong Kong in the 1960s, Stanley was a remote fishing village sitting on the southeast corner of a peninsula on Hong Kong Island. In late December, 1941, during the last few fighting days defending Hong Kong against the overwhelming Japanese Imperial Army marching south from China, hundreds of Commonwealth soldiers managed to run, walk, or crawl their way to this tiny strip of land. Those that managed to escape death were captured and spent three years and eight months in unspeakable and inhuman environment in POW camps. Today, a short 5-minute walk from the bustling and tourist-filled Stanley Market is a small Commonwealth War Cemetery, the final resting place for a number of young men from the Îles-de-la-Madeleine.



Magdalen Islands, these photos were taken during my trip in July 2018.

Stanley War Cemetery, Hong Kong. I took these photos during the summer of 2017.

The Topics

Forgiveness contains two WWII's subjects that are dear to my heart: the defence of Hong Kong and the Japanese Internment in Canada.

Personally it seems fitting that two battalions of Canadian young soldiers were shipped to Hong Kong in 1941 to defend the territory. The link symbolizes my own straddling of the two important places of my life. Hong Kong was the place of my birth and where I spent my formative years; Canada is the place where I received my education and enjoyed a long and fulfilling career as a high school teacher.

In the summer of 2017 I paid my respects at the Stanley Military Cemetery where hundreds of young Canadian soldiers were buried. They were sent to defend a place that was foreign to them and a people who were alien to them. As a pacifist, military history makes me uncomfortable because it often comes across as glorification of wars. Only in recent years I am able to reconcile that I could be resolutely anti-war and honor the veterans at the same time. As former President Jimmy Carter once said: "War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good." Each young soldier who was sent to Hong Kong has his story to tell and this book tells one of the stories.

The history of Japanese internment is of interest to me because it is important to be reminded, again and again, that it was only in recent past the majority of Canadians with the assent of our government carried out acts of aggression towards her fellow citizens because of the colour of their skins. I am afraid in our current political environment similar poisonous rhetoric is being spewed against the "illegals" and the foreigners who are simultaneously lazy and taking "our jobs" away. Visible minorities and newcomers are often voiceless because they are fearful of what else could happen to them if they speak up. Although the book is not a discourse on the terrible consequences of the ill-advised policy of internment, it illustrates the horrendous impact it had on just one family. As responsible citizens, we must remember and guard against that happening again.

The People

Mark Sakamoto is a grandson of Ralph Maclean and Mituse Sakamoto. Ralph MacLean is Mark's paternal grandfather who grew up in a large family with an abusive father in Gross-Iles, Quebec. In 1940, at age 18, he enlisted into the Canadian Army and was shipped to Hong Kong to defend the British colony against the Japanese invasion. Mitsue Sakamoto is Mark's maternal grandmother who was born and grew up in Vancouver, British Columbia. Soon after the attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, her entire family was interned to Alberta. Both his grandparents are damaged people and they were linked by this dark chapter of history. It must have been a difficult conversation when Ralph first learned from his daughter Diane about a young man Stan who was Japanese. The same would have been true when Mituse first heard from her son Stan about a young woman Diane whose father was in the Canadian Army. It would have been understandable if both Ralph or Mituse put a stop to the relationship of Stan and Diane. Mark Sakamoto refers to his life as a gift from his grandparents with good reason.

In the later part of the book, Mark told the tragic story of his mother, Diane Maclean and how her downfall almost paralyzed him to the point of no return.

Ralph Maclean was damaged by the brutality of war. Like many survivors from wars, he had to endure the memory of experiencing the rage and helplessness of the death of his best friend Deighton Aitken whose body was buried in a war cemetery in Hong Kong. As a young man, Ralph was confronted with real evil as he witnessed countless episodes of gratuitous violence and senseless death. When the war began to go badly for the Japanese in early 1945, along with other POWs who were barely strong enough to walk a few hundred steps

without falling, Ralph was chosen to be shipped to Japan to become a labourer for the war effort. The sea journey was horrendous: a few hundreds starving men were squeezed into a locked and unlit cargo hold. There was not enough space so they could only take turns lying down. They were not given any food and only a few buckets of drinking water. To add to the suffering was the indignity of not being given access to toilet facilities. Many men died of illness but many more probably died because they were finally broken after waves of unspeakable pains and suffering. Ralph barely made it to Japan but found himself clinging to life. His dream that life as a labourer would be better than a POW was quickly dashed. In fact, Ralph was so weak that he was not able to work. If it had not been the kindness of his campmate, Henry Marsolais, who brought him some rice gruel at the end of each day, Ralph would have died in Japan. Finally, in the autumn of 1945, Ralph was liberated by the Americans. It was four years and eight months since he and Deighton Aitken had enrolled with the Canadian Army. Since that time, Ralph have lost half of his body weight. And during his life as a POW, he was blinded once and paralyzed twice. His memories were filled with beating, pain, degradation, hunger, dying, death, and hopelessness. But Ralph was the “lucky” one because he survived.

Mituse Sakamoto was damaged by the naked racism against the Japanese Canadians before and during WWII. After the Pearl Harbour attack on December 7 1941, although she was a Canadian citizen by birth, Mituse and her family, along with their fellow Japanese Canadians, were rounded up and sent to internment camps or farms in the Prairies. In all, in the name of national security, more than fifteen hundred Japanese Canadians who lived within the hundred-mile coast of British Columbia were interned. Before being shipped inland, the Sakamotos had their fishing boat confiscated. In June 1942, a registered letter from the Government of Canada arrived. The letter confirmed they would be interned and the family could stay together if they went to sugar-beet work camps in the prairies. Like their Japanese friends, the Sakamotos were forced to sell off their possession at a ridiculously low price and abandon their modest home. For the imposed journey eastward, each of them was allowed to bring 150 pounds of luggage. They carried what they could, but food took up most of the weight. On the day of departure, a large group of them were loaded onto cattle cars on a freight train for the long ride to the Prairies. The Sakamotos were frightened and fear for the future but at least they knew the family would be able to stay together. After a long and uncomfortable journey, they finally arrived at Coaldale, Alberta. A farmer met them at the train station and without much exchange of words, he drove the Sakamotos to his modest farm. On his property, a dilapidated animal barn sat behind his house. This would become the Sakamotos new “home”.

Life as internees was harsh. Their days were long and tough and their pay was pitiful. The family almost died during the first winter when they had to brave the frigid temperature in an uninsulated leaky barn where they could see the falling snow through the cracks. After the war, the Sakamotos, like other Japanese Canadians, were given a "choice" to return to their "homeland" Japan, which many of them had never seen. Mituse dreamed of going back to Vancouver. In an attempt to raise enough funds to return to the home that they knew, the Sakamotos, based on the list of possessions they had before they were forced into exile, submitted a claim of \$818 to the Japanese Property Claims Commission. To their horror, after waiting for two months, on August 5, 1947, they received a letter from the Department of the Secretary of State (Office of the Custodian, Japanese Evacuation Section) that the non-appealable final settlement for the indignity they suffered was a grand total of \$25.65. Mituse’s dream of returning to Vancouver was shattered. But Mituse was the ‘lucky’ one because she survived.

Diane Maclean, the daughter of Ralph and Phyllis Maclean, was damaged by the cruel and dehumanizing effects of addiction. After the war, Ralph took a long train ride home to Grosse-Îles from Vancouver. The train had a stopover in Calgary where Ralph met his future wife in a chance encounter. It was love at first sight; he soon returned to Calgary and after a short courtship they were married. As a young adult, Diane was a loving and devoted mother of two sons. Unfortunately her husband Stan, Mark’s father, was running a failing business. That created financial strains and the subsequent emotional distance was too much to hold the marriage together. After the divorce, Diane found herself caught in a downward spiral of abuse by a younger boyfriend and an unshakeable alcohol dependency. In spite of wanting to get clean numerous times, like many addicts she was not able to muster enough escape velocity. As her eldest son, Mark had the unenviable task of

watching helplessly his mother's descent into hell. Although the focus of the book is on Mark's grandparents, the tragic tale of Diane plays an important role because Mark too has to wrestle with the meaning of forgiveness and moving on.



Photos of Ralph Maclean and Deighton Aitken in the Veterans Museum, Grosse-Îles. I took these photos during my visit, before I read the book.



Source: the above photos are from the Canadian Encyclopedia's website
<<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/japanese-internment-banished-and-beyond-tears-feature/>>

Moving On

"Forgiveness is moving on. It is a daily act that looks forward. Forgiveness smiles."
[p.237]

"Let bygones be bygones." This is the refrain often heard when we tell people of a tragic event in our past. The same could be say of how a nation often deals with its past. As a third-party bystander, without having to suffer the pain and injustice, it is particularly easy to implore people to forgive and forget. However, if the same misfortunes were inflicted on ourselves, I am not certain we would be able to utter "let bygones be bygones" as easily and readily. Forgiveness demands courage. Forgiveness requires grace.

Ralph Maclean quotes the Gospel of Mark 11:25 as he began his journey of forgiveness after the war. Mituse Sakamoto was relying on the strength of her family and the teaching of her culture as she too began her journey of forgiveness. In both cases, although there were few details in how each of them dealt with the enormous challenge of not dwelling in bitterness, anger, and despair, we do have glimpses of grace and hope as they march forward bravely in life despite of the injustices and cruelties they had to endure: their devotion to their families; their loving tenderness towards their children; their faith in God and the goodness of people. Against all odds, both Ralph and Mituse found enough peace and strength to sustain them and to move on. There is a photograph of them meeting for the first time at a dinner party. To be civil with the other person whose government was responsible for the deep scars they had to carry must have been exceptionally awkward and trying. To get over that and to allow their own children to enter into a relationship is the ultimate affirmation of love over hate.

Mark's account of his tortured relationship with his mother Diane is heart-wrenching. The bond between a mother and her son is primal and strong. As the eldest son, Mark has to live with the reality of Diane's losing battle against addictions and abuse. His helplessness and guilt of not being able to pull his mother out of the

abyss haunted him. Perhaps he opted to attend law school at the University of Dalhousie in Halifax, Nova Scotia just to get away from the anguish. After years of abuse and addiction, Diane's body finally gave up. Because of that episode, Mark found himself fell into a deep spiral of depression for several years. Fortunately for him, with the help of his loving wife, Jade, he too was able to forgive and move on.

There are many moments in life that we need to be reminded that life is messy and full of things that are not reconcilable. Forgiveness is not a transaction and moving on is not a single event. It is a difficult lesson to learn and accept but it is often the only way to move forward.

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