



Chiru Sakura

Falling Cherry Blossoms

A Mother and Daughter's Journey through
Racism, Internment and Oppression

GRACE EIKO THOMSOM

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Before beginning this journey, I acknowledge that we are living on unceded x^wməθk^wəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish) and səílwətaʔt̓/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) territories.



INTRODUCTION

Mother begins:

March 1, 1997

I am currently living in a senior care residence, passing my every day in gratitude for the care and support given me by my son Kenji and daughters Eiko and Keiko. Gradually, I seem to be losing my memory, so I have been making note of things I want to leave behind, such as how I have been spending my time and what I experienced, especially during the Second World War.

I am now eighty-four years of age.

One day, while I was visiting my mother at the care home where she was residing, she offered me a small green booklet titled “Journal.” Pointing to the opening page, she said, “Here, take a look. Can you read this?” It appeared to be a diary, beginning with the date March 1, 1997. I read the first page out loud to her. She smiled and said, “Oh, that’s good. I’ll keep it at that level,” and quickly withdrew the book.

I wondered at the time what that was all about. She did not explain it to me, but of course she was confirming that I could read her entries, which were written in Japanese. What I had seen was the beginning page of a memoir that she would eventually leave with me to translate and to share with my siblings.

When she handed the booklet back to me a few years later, saying “It’s finished” and nothing more, for some reason, likely because she was still near me in my daily life, I did not act immediately. I read the booklet over quickly and then, even as questions arose in my mind, I put it aside. (Was I avoiding the past? Yes, I think so.)

It wasn't until a few years later, when Mother was experiencing health problems, that I began thinking of our past together. Once I realized that I was nearing the age at which she had begun writing her memoir, I felt an urgency not only to read it again but also to examine my own memories of the years I had spent with her as a child and a young woman, often in conflict, as between a strong mother born in Japan and a stubborn, though always obedient, daughter born here in Canada. Ours was a complicated relationship during difficult times.

In the spring of 2001, with a fracture in her back caused by osteoporosis, Mother had been admitted to Mount Saint Joseph Hospital in Vancouver to receive treatment for pain control and rehabilitation. She was at that time living in Adanac Towers, the Kinsmen apartment for seniors on Commercial Drive, where several other seniors of Japanese ancestry resided.

During the month she was confined, the younger of her two sons, my brother Kenji, who had been suffering from lung cancer, died. Though she tried, and even got dressed to go to the funeral service, Mother did not have the strength to attend. Since her older son, my brother Toyoaki, and her husband, my father, Torasaburo, had passed in 1983 and 1985, respectively, Kenji had been her sole caregiver before my move back to Vancouver in 1994. Very kind and thoughtful, Kenji had phoned Mother daily, offering the news and a weather forecast, including advice on whether to venture outdoors or not.

After leaving the hospital, Mother tried to maintain her apartment but within days she had fallen off her bed and had to be returned to hospital care. An independent woman, she had lain on the floor until morning, not wishing to bother anyone during the night. She announced to me from her hospital bed that she had no intention of returning to her apartment but would await a room in a care facility. As luck would have it, she was soon notified of a space opening at the German-Canadian Care Home. She clearly declared her intention: "I will go there. I remember visiting someone at that home and I thought it was a good place."

Unlike other seniors I had heard about, who had to be persuaded to move to such a facility for their own sake, Mother instructed me to

immediately begin clearing out her apartment, saying she had no need or desire to go back there and enumerating only a few things to be kept.

When my sister Keiko came from her home in Winnipeg to help in the process, Mother instructed us from her bed, “Don’t forget to go through the things on the balcony. Take the planters apart, and dispose of them carefully.”

We wondered what in the world she was talking about. Who cared about planters on the balcony when she was leaving the apartment? But when mothers instruct, though we may often argue, we usually obey. And in doing so, we were aghast to find, tucked in a plastic bag in one of the planters, bills totalling \$10,000! She told us after we found the money that the cash had been kept there for emergency purposes and now we should use it as required.

Because of the way Mother had prepared for this eventuality, Keiko and I felt no need for sadness about her move. In fact, there was some hilarity not only about the hidden money but also over other things we joked about admiringly with family members. For instance, in going through Mother’s personal belongings, we found attached to each piece of jewellery or valuable object a note specifying who should have it, or where the item had come from and who had given it to her so that we might return it to the original owner.

Upon moving into the care home, she had adjusted in short order. Whenever I visited, I saw that she was receiving hugs from staff members, especially the younger ones. I felt great relief at seeing this since I had some guilt about not inviting her to live with me. Mother and I had discussed this briefly and had agreed laughingly that we would be arguing in no time. More than that, I was living at the time in North Vancouver and commuting to a job at the Burnaby Art Gallery.

I phoned Mother daily to ensure she was all right, and we met weekly for a meal or more often as needs arose.

I did have one particular worry, and that was about the food served at the German-Canadian home. I thought that Mother would miss eating Japanese food, her own cooking, but she seemed not at all concerned with the menu. In fact, one time when I took her to Hi Genki restaurant at Nikkei Place in Burnaby, she commented that the rice

there was *kowai* (not cooked to her taste). I suspected it was not about the rice. I had taken her to consider an apartment at Sakura-so, the seniors' residence at Nikkei Place, since one of her friends, Mrs. Hara, lived there. But Mother found the apartment she toured too large, especially since it contained a washer, a dryer and a stove, all, she said, things of her past that she had no use for now. A few weeks after our visit, we learned that, sadly for Mother, her friend Mrs. Hara had quite suddenly passed away.

We continued with our weekly lunch at a sushi restaurant on Commercial Drive, not far from her new home, enjoying the *nabeyaki*, *donburi*, sushi and sashimi. I think that was quite enough Japanese food for her. In fact, our family had always eaten Western food, perhaps even more than Japanese food, in our everyday lives. Father, having lived and worked in Canada for some years before he married, including particularly at railway hotels, enjoyed Western food and loved to cook. He introduced us to various dishes.

Mother was, I believe, as I am today, quite content with solitude, her own company. She was always busy reading and writing. After moving to the home, she took to watching drama series on TV, likely owing to her failing eyesight, which prevented heavy reading. She would at times talk to me about something someone had done, only for me to realize later that the person was a character in a soap opera she had been watching. This led me to wonder how much English she actually understood. I had never heard her speak more than a few necessary words, and she relied on me entirely as her interpreter—so I had thought.

At times she would complain about something that was not in accord with or done to her satisfaction at the home. But when I suggested that I bring the matter up with staff, she would say, “No, don't. I can handle this on my own.” Of course, I worried about how she was going to do this. When Keiko and I emptied Mother's suite at the care home after her passing in 2002, we found on her desk many scraps of paper on which were written Japanese words or phrases with the English equivalents beside them, likely taken from the many dictionaries Father had left behind. She was a proud woman and insisted on managing on her own.

I did not begin translating her memoir until after she passed. And it was in rereading it that I began realizing how generational differences affect interpretation of those years, the many years of struggle each of us, together and apart, had lived and endured. I decided then to complete the journey begun by Mother, each of us finding our own resolution.



Sawae at seventeen. She was studying in Wakayama when her mother became sick, and Sawae returned to care for her before her passing. Author's personal collection