



Michiko's Story

During the war, the government forced nearly 23,000 Japanese Canadians from their homes, mostly in British Columbia. It said that because Canada and Japan were at war, Japanese Canadians couldn't be trusted. Even though 14,000 of them had been born here, they had to move to shacks near far-away communities and work for little or no pay. The government took and sold most of their property. Here is the story of one Japanese-Canadian girl.

Michiko "Midge" Ishii was born in 1930 in Vancouver, where she grew up playing with kids from lots of different backgrounds. But when Japan attacked Pearl Harbour and Hong Kong in December 1941, many Canadians feared it could invade British Columbia. Existing racism against Japanese Canadians soon built into outright hatred and anger. In 1942, the Canadian government started

rounding up Japanese Canadians in B.C. Thousands were herded behind fences in Vancouver's Hastings Park, and had to sleep in a giant barn.

The government wanted to remove people it thought could be spies or supporters of the enemy, even though, as one military commander said, "I cannot see that Japanese Canadians constitute the slightest menace to national security."



Clockwise from bottom left: Michiko with her father and brothers at the Lemon Creek site. The shack-like houses in the background had little insulation against the cold; Michiko's father Kenji is second from left in this group of Japanese Canadian forced workers; Michiko "Midge" Ishii Ayukawa became a chemist, historian and author later in life.

Anyone who resisted being uprooted and sent to the interior of B.C. was treated like a prisoner of war. The government seized Japanese Canadians' houses, businesses and fishing boats. It sold them and used the money to pay for the forced relocation.

In 1942, Michiko's father and older brother were sent to a work camp near Lemon Creek. (These were not like a fun place you might go in the summer. These camps were dirty and crowded, and the men were forced to do hard labour.) In the fall, Michiko, her mother and two younger brothers were given just one day to pack up before being sent away to join the others. At first they lived in a tent with a dirt floor. They spent the winter in a wooden shack with no insulation to keep the cold out.

The Ishiis had to live in Lemon Creek until 1946. Even after the war, they were not allowed to go home to Vancouver. The government told Japanese Canadians they had to either move to Japan, where most of them had never lived, or move east of the Rocky Mountains. Even when the family settled in their new home in Hamilton, Ont., the government insisted they report to the RCMP.

Michiko endured racism all through high school. She earned two university degrees in chemistry and became the first woman to be hired in her department of the National Research Council in Ottawa. She married in 1955 and had five children. In 1980, she and her husband moved back to British Columbia, settling in Sooke on Vancouver Island. Michiko earned another degree in 1997, this one in Japanese-Canadian history. She died in 2013.