

Japan's apology overdue

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9/07/2009 1:00 AM

ON Sunday, Emperor Akihito of Japan and his wife are scheduled to pay their respects at the Japanese Language School and Hall in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The historic building is all that remains of what was once known as Japantown or Little Tokyo, a distinct neighbourhood of Japanese-Canadians for several decades until its residents were interned or relocated during the Second World War.

The visit is bound to revive painful memories of the way Canada treated its Japanese citizens. In 1907, for example, the enclave in downtown Vancouver was attacked by members of a group called the Asiatic Exclusion League, but the community persevered, despite repeated restrictions and acts of discrimination, culminating in their forced removal and the seizure of their property during the war.

For many Japanese-Canadians, nothing could undo the pain of being betrayed by their own government, but Ottawa eventually tried to make amends with an official apology in 1988 and a compensation package. It was the best that Canada could do to make up for the sins of the past.

If this history is shared with the emperor on Sunday, hopefully someone will remind him that there is some other unfinished business between Canada and Japan arising from the war.

Neither the emperor nor the government of Japan has ever apologized for the treatment of about 1,700 Canadian prisoners of war, including some 900 from Manitoba who served in the Winnipeg Grenadiers, for the way they were treated following the Battle of Hong Kong in 1941.

Many prisoners, including some wounded, were executed following 17 days of fighting. They were probably the lucky ones. The survivors went on to endure years of brutality, torture, starvation and forced labour. Nearly 300 men died from the abuse, but those who made it home were never the same. They had lifelong health problems, particularly mental and emotional issues that forever haunted them and their families.

Forty years after the war ended, the survivors demanded an apology and compensation from the Japanese government. They launched legal action and took their case to the United Nations, but they got nowhere. Finally, in 1998, the government of Canada paid compensation to about 350 veterans and 400 widows, but it was a hollow victory because the veterans wanted Japan to acknowledge its responsibility. Their fight was for justice, not money.

Germany has apologized for its conduct under Hitler and the country has spent billions of dollars in compensation to Holocaust victims, Israel and slave labourers. Japan, however, suffers from what is known as "a history problem."

Over the years, various forms of apology have been leveraged out of Japanese officials for the wide variety of crimes their country committed during the war, but they have usually been couched in carefully crafted diplomatic language and their sincerity has been questioned. Last May, for the first time, Tokyo apologized through its ambassador to the United States for its treatment of American prisoners of war who suffered in the Bataan Death March of 1942, but there is no sign that Canadian veterans are due for their apology.

About 80 frail and elderly survivors are still waiting. For them, the war never ended, but the emperor can help bring it to a close and put an end to this unfinished business.

Republished from the Winnipeg Free Press print edition July 9, 2009 A10