

# Marching to his own beat

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, it was considered a defining moment in world history.

That event led to the United States, Britain and Canada declaring war on Japan and getting officially involved in World War II. Their involvement led to the eventual defeat of Germany.

But for the many Nikkei or Canadians of Japanese descent living in Canada, Dec. 7, 1941, was



Nicholas Davis

a defining moment for very different reasons. Nearly 23,000 Nikkei were sent to camps in British Columbia in what was considered the greatest mass movement in Canadian history.

Many of the Japanese living in Canada at the time were second generation Canadians whose parents came to this country to make a better life for themselves and their families. Kiyoshi Nagata's parents belonged to that group of second generation Canadians.

"My parents were born in British Columbia and living in Vancouver when they were interned," Nagata says. "Their families lost all their stuff, but when I ask them about it, they say they found life in an internment camp no different than the life of poverty they were living in at the time, except they lost all their property."

In 1949, four years after Japan had surrendered, the Nikkei were allowed to resettle their lives. For those who lived in British Columbia, since their property had been confiscated or sold, many decided to resettle in other parts of the country. That's what led Nagata's parents to Richmond Hill, where Nagata was born.

"They came here to try to rebuild their lives," Nagata says. "But even though they were Canadian citizens by birth, they felt they always had to prove themselves to be Canadian."

"So when I was growing up, I didn't have any association

with Japanese culture.

"They didn't want what happened to them to ever happen to me, so they thought the more removed I was from my culture, the less likelihood of that happening. But in a place like Toronto, it's hard to shelter someone, and I soon discovered what my ancestry was. And I was fascinated by it."

Nagata found his culture when he heard about Toronto's Caravan Festival — a showcase of cultures from around the world. A Japanese cultural centre was hosting the Japan pavilion and 12-year-old Nagata volunteered. Of all the things about his culture that he learned during that experience, it was the drumming that fascinated him the most.

"It was the first time I had ever seen taiko drummers," Nagata recalls. "I was absolutely floored by the sheer volume of the sound, a sound that I could feel through my entire body. It was something I had never felt before."

Seeing their son's enthusiasm, Nagata's parents decided to support his efforts to find out about his culture.

When the Japanese cultural centre invited back one of the taiko drummers the next year to give workshops, they let Nagata participate.

Nagata has since gone on to become Canada's preeminent taiko soloist. He's been performing for more than 24 years and is now the leader of the Kiyoshi Nagata Ensemble (KNE), one of only a handful of professional taiko drum ensembles in North America.

Nagata now teaches a credit course in taiko at U of T's faculty of music and also teaches a public course at the Royal Conservatory of Music. "For a while I had to do part-time jobs to get by, and of course my parents worried about me. But the group is thriving now and I couldn't be happier. And I'm forever grateful to my parents for their support."



Kiyoshi Nagata Ensemble's annual concert presents "Sacred Tree" this Friday and Saturday night at the Al Green Theatre in the Miles Nadal JCC (corner of Bloor St. and Spadina Ave.).

For more information, call 416-978-8849.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID L. FOX

Kiyoshi Nagata — one of Canada's preeminent taiko soloists — leads the Kiyoshi Nagata Ensemble, one of only a handful of professional Taiko drum ensembles in North America.