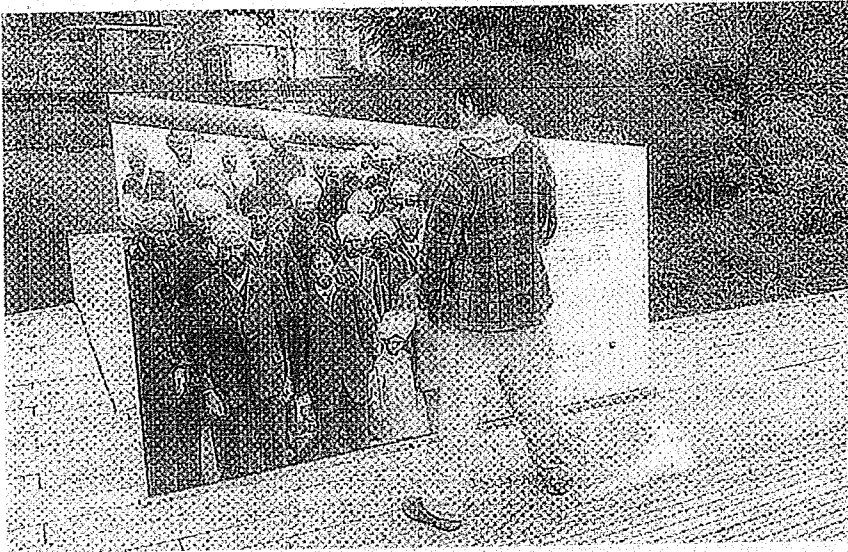


## Poignant irony behind the sad story of a man who urinated on the memory of Komagata Maru

By Pete McMartin, Vancouver Sun January 16, 2014

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### The man has apologized for urinating on Coal Harbour's Komagata Maru monument in December.

The subject was pee, and the press conference, which was staged to air both an official apology and an unofficial one, took place Thursday in the innards of the Vancouver Police Department's Cambie headquarters.

Arrayed behind the podium stood Mayor Gregor Robertson, VPD chief Jim Chu, Vancouver councillor Kerry Jang and seven leaders of the South Asian community. As an ensemble, they were, quite ostensibly, the posterchildren of the city's racial and cultural harmony, such as it is, and if at that moment they had broken into a chorus of We Are The World, I would not have been in the least surprised. As one reporter near me said quietly:

"Holy f---ing photo op."

The same could be said for the phalanx of reporters, cameramen and photographers facing them. We were a multicultural crew, and several languages were being spoken while we waited for the fun to begin. I thought, looking at us, does anything bring us together more in this town than the aggravations of race?

And, oh yes, urination?

In early December, a man had urinated on a memorial plaque commemorating the Komagata Maru, the ship that in 1914 carried 376 passengers from the Punjab who were trying to enter into Canada through Vancouver. That voyage — the centennial of which will be commemorated this year — was a challenge to Canada's racist exclusionary laws of the time, and only 20 returning residents and the ship's doctor and family were let off the boat.

The remaining passengers, all South Asian, were not. After a two-month standoff in the harbour, the ship was forced to sail back to Asia with all its passengers.

Since then, the Komagata Maru has been to the South Asian community an historical marker representing more than a few things: beginnings, pride, perseverance ... and resentment.

At any rate, the suspect who relieved himself on the memorial was caught on camera, and the photo quickly went viral. Official community rage followed. There were calls for a hate crime investigation and criminal charges to be pressed.

What precipitated the suspect to commit his urinary act is unclear, and one account of an eye witness seemed to suggest the suspect's own state of resentment outweighed his racist impulses — that he was the type who wanted to piss on the world, and the memorial plaque merely happened to be the latest and most convenient target. In other words, he was probably a sad case.

More rage followed when the VPD decided not to press charges. The South Asian community — at least, those who spoke for it — felt it was an affront and disrespectful, a feeling echoed in the Georgia Straight, in a commentary on the incident, when it wondered in a headline: “Is The Komagata Maru pisser related to a cop, judge or politician?” If ever there was a case of yellow journalism, this was it.

It turned out the pisser was none of the above, or if he was, it had nothing to do with the cops’ decision not to press the matter.

He was an addict “afflicted with a serious mental disorder,” said Chu during the press conference, and who lived in a single-room occupancy hotel in the Downtown Eastside.

“The man has come to our attention many times before. Many times. It’s quite likely he didn’t realize it was a memorial.”

So the cops decided — more out of a sense of clemency, I believe, than convenience — not to treat it as a criminal case or hate crime, and not even to levy a bylaw fine against the suspect for urinating in public. He was too poor to pay it, anyway.

“This suspect needs the health system,” Chu said, “not the justice system.”

Then Chu produced the suspect’s apology, and it was a sad thing, written on a lined piece of yellow foolscap, the man’s signature an illegible scribble. Even its message was tinged with the pitiful.

“I am sorry for what I did that day at the monument. I didn’t want to hurt anyone.”

This apology, and the circumstances around it, had been communicated to the leaders of the South Asian community by Robertson and Chu the day before, and when those leaders appeared at the press conference on Thursday, they seemed assuaged by it and ready to forgive both the suspect and, as their attendance at the press conference implied, the cops.

As a public act, it was an admirable one and, more than that, the appropriate one. Race and racism divides and bedevils this town like nothing else, but here, finally, was something good that came out of it: An act of grace.

At the end of the press conference, the president of Vancouver’s influential Khalsa Diwan Society, Sohan Singh Deo, stayed behind to answer reporters’ questions. While he did so, he held the suspect’s written apology in his hands.

There was a poignant irony in this:

Twice a month, volunteers from the Khalsa Diwan Society venture down to the sidewalks of the Downtown Eastside to dispense hot food to the needy. The Society holds blanket and clothing drives to dispense during the winter, too, and contributes to the neighbourhood’s food bank.

The suspect, accused of pissing on the memory of the Komagata Maru, might have very well been a benefactor of the Society’s charitable works. My, how things change in a hundred years.

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