

JAPANESE CULTURAL CENTER OF HAWAII

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Janet Chieko Uehara (JU)

October 13, 2004

BY: Florence Sugimoto (FS)

FS: Please give your name in full, your birth date and your place of birth.

JU: My name is Janet Chieko. I used to be Tahara, now it's Uehara. And I was born in Jinseki-*gun* Hiroshima-*ken*, Japan, January 1, 1925.

FS: May I have your ...

JU: My father's name is Kameo Takara, and he was born January 1, 1889 Taisho-*mura*, Ashina-*gun*, Hiroshima, Japan. And my mother, she was Iwa Tahara, and she was born on June 10, 1882. And she was born in Jinseki-*gun*, Kami-*mura*, Hiroshima, Japan.

FS: What brought them to Hawaii?

JU: My father was a Shinto priest and my brother also, my second brother. You see, on Kauai, they had an opening because the priest over there had left Hawaii, he returned to Japan. So, they had an opening over there. So, my father was called 1935 December; we landed in Honolulu, and in January we moved to Lawai. That was Kauai. Lawai, Kauai. And my brother was in Nawiliwili, Kauai. They had a church over there, too. *Omiiai*, yeah? And so, five years before the war --- we lived there five years and then the war started.

FS: May I ask what language was spoken at home?

JU: It was mostly all Japanese, without English. All Japanese.

FS: Did they try to teach you certain kinds of values, or ideas, anything special like remembering your ancestors, working hard or...

JU: Oh, yes. My father always said, work hard, be honest. Also, education was important, he told me. But, I regret it that I couldn't get a good education, because after the war, I came back, but, you know, I had to support my family, so I couldn't educate myself. That's the only regret I have for going to the camp.

FS: How many children were there in the family?

JU: We had three. From my mom and my dad --- there was second marriage for both of them. From my mom, she had two children from previous marriage, and she lived in Honolulu before Kauai, before with her first husband. And from my father and her, I'm the only one. So, had three: two boys and a girl. Three children.

FS: Would that make you *nisei*?

JU: My mother's were *nisei*, because they were born in Hawaii. But, I was *issei*; I was born in Japan.

FS: What was family life like?

JU: Well, we were close, and we got along fine.

FS: I guess your father had a lot of time to spend with his family.

JU: Yes, yes. Of course, he was busy with his church. But, the neighbors were all good, and we never had to buy vegetables or anything. They would bring everything for us, the food, papayas, and all the vegetables, we never bought, even rice, we never buy. So really, a good life we had before the war.

FS: What language and language schools did you go to in English and Japanese?

JU: I went to Kalaheo Intermediate School. No, I mean, not intermediate but, yeah I think was intermediate, language school and intermediate combined. Then Lawai Japanese School. I finished tenth grade Japanese school. And my father said I should [get] my education in Japanese, so he sent me to Honolulu just before the war...

FS: To go to Japanese school?

JU: Yes. There's a Chuogakuin [Japanese Central Language Institute] in Nuuanu. He sent me there. I had my brother, the oldest one, was living in Honolulu. He was married and he had two children. I stayed with them. That was near that Natsunoya Tea House up in School Street, near over there. So, I was there between September and the war started in December, so I witnessed the war, you know, Pearl Harbor attack. Because there was Japanese tea house and it was two-story and it was high and you can see all of that. They told us, "Come up, there's maneuvers going on, there's shipping going on." We got all excited and we all ran upstairs the tea house and we were watching it.

FS: Was it on December 7?

JU: Yes, December 7.

FS: And you were in Japanese school at that time?

JU: No, no. That was Sunday, so we were home. The tea house people called us, and they said, "Come up, there's something. Maneuver is going on and there's something to see," they told us, because they shooting, and we saw the airplane. The *hi-no-maru*, like that. They were shooting, shooting, and all the black smoke up in the sky and was so nice. [laughs] And, then they said, "Aw, they missed the target." They thought the round stuff was the Japanese -- the *hi-no-maru* was the target. They didn't know that was Japanese plane coming...

FS: Oh, so you saw the...

JU: "...They miss the target, they shooting balloons, they missing again, they missing again." [laughs] We were having so much fun watching that.

FS: Then you saw both American and Japanese planes.

JU: Yes.

FS: I see. I see.

JU: Then, somebody said, "How come today is Sunday and they have maneuvers? They usually don't do that. And, then somebody switched the radio. "Everybody gotta take cover! It's war, you know! Japan is attacking us!" Everybody got all scared, and we ran away to our homes. [laughs] After that, my father and my mom up in Kauai --- and they said that my mom told us they were taken that night already. My father and my brother were taken to Kapaa Jail, the prison over there.

FS: How were you able to get back to Kauai?

JU: That's why. There's no transportation for me to go back. And, my sister-in-law, she doesn't speak English either, my brother's wife. She had two children. She scared, because she doesn't know what's happening, and so she want me to come back, you know, but I couldn't come back because no transportation, even boat because they don't let you go on, because you're alien or something. But, several months later, they told me that I could go on the army transport.

FS: Who told you you could?

JU: I think the immigration or --- I don't know who, I --- that time I really don't remember...

FS: Someone must have made contact with your brother....

JU: Yeah, I was telling them, that I wanted to go back, you know, but I don't know where, I really don't know. [laughs] Asking me if I could go back, but they said, "No, cannot, cannot." But, later on they told me that I could go back and was a transport with all the

soldiers and there was another old lady from Kapaa, Kauai. She and I only in one room car. But, kind of scary, you know. [laughs] All the soldiers, like that, they staring at us. But, that's how we went home.

FS: Transport going to Kauai.

JU: Yes.

FS: This was how many months later, would you say?

JU: That was maybe March, I think.

FS: And by then, your father had already been arrested.

JU: Yeah. So, December 24, 1942 army transport from Kauai came and took us to the immigration center -- our family, my mom and my sister-in-law and the two kids and myself. There were many others besides...

FS: This was in 1942?

JU: '42. Yeah. December 1942.

FS: Do you remember anything while you were on Kauai and your father was at the immigration service or at Kapaa Prison? Did you get to visit him during that period?

JU: Yes. We did and he told us that there's *nankin mushi* was eating them up, if we can bring something to get rid of them. [laughs] I remember that.

FS: Oh, I see. And you...

JU: Nothing much that we could do. Before they transport us to Immigration, what-you-call, Lawai --- my mom one time was living in Lawai, but my other brother was in Nawiliwili. So we moved to Nawiliwili, because my sister-in-law was so scared, you know? [laughs]

FS: Of what?

JU: She said that the soldiers like that was coming up, you see, because they curious about the temple, yeah? So they would come up, she said, and she so afraid of them.

FS: I see.

JU: My mom and I had to move to Nawiliwili where she was living. My brother had church over there, too -- Nawiliwili.

FS: How did the neighbors react?

JU: They were nice.

FS: They were so nice to everyone and tried to help?

JU: Yeah, but we didn't know too many other nationalities then, only Japanese people we knew, that's why. We knew other nationalities would be different story again.

FS: And so from Nawiliwili you were summoned to come to Honolulu...

JU: Yes. We went on an Army transport boat.

FS: Again?

JU: Yes. We went to the immigration station, and about three days later, Dec. 27, 1942, we went on the *Lurline*. Good thing we went on the nice boat some time. *Lurline*. That was the last voyage for *Lurline*. On the boat was okay. They were playing ukulele, and this and that, and the guy singing. Was okay, you know? Then, Jan. 1, 1943 we arrived in San Francisco and then ferry boat took us to Oakland, and Santa Fe trail and a train was waiting for us over there. It took us four nights and five days on the train. And, Jan. 5, 1943 we arrived at Denson, Jerome, Arkansas.

FS: How were you dressed?

JU: We did not have much to carry, just one suitcase, that's all you can take. They didn't let us know early enough, only one day or two days they let us pack your things and leave, yeah? So we didn't have much clothes, and no winter clothes. It was cold when we went January. It was snowing and everything.

FS: And so that was the first camp that you actually went to.

JU: Yes.

FS: Jerome?

JU: Yes.

FS: I see. Do you remember how long you were there?

JU: About two years, yeah? And then...

FS: What was life like over there?

JU: Oh, so cold for us, and we didn't have winter clothes. They set up a school for us, and they had volunteer teachers to come from the outside to teach us. We didn't want to go school, because it was so cold. [laughs] Everybody would gather around the stove, we had a pot-bellied stove and fire and firewood that we would burn, yeah?

FS: How far away was school?

JU: Oh, maybe half a mile. Not too far away from where we lived. And then, nobody went to school for a few days. [laughing] After that we met someone, and they said, "How come Hawaii kids are like that?" Nobody wanted to go outside. We all gather around the stove, and only talk story. Nobody went school maybe one whole week some of us didn't go school. [laughing] But we were told we had to go school, you know. And then, there was one store like...

FS: What grade was this?

JU: I was a junior.

FS: High school junior.

JU: But we didn't have good subjects to choose. We had art and stuff like that, you know. [laughs] And, music *kine* subject, yeah? And one teacher told us --- this *haole* teacher, she was one of the volunteers. She said, "You know what my friends told me?" She told them that she goes to the camp, the Japanese camp over there, to teach them school, to teach them, and then her friends told her, "Oh, I didn't know you spoke Japanese!" [laughing] "They ignorant, you know," she tells us. They all from California, and all that, they all speak English. But she think they from Japan, or something, they think, you know?

FS: You didn't go to Japanese school there at Jerome?

JU: Later on they had Japanese school. But then...

FS: But, you didn't attend?

JU: No, I didn't attend. The California students were so studious, and they real smart, you know [laughs]...

FS: You're talking about the California internees?

JU: Japanese school, yeah?

FS: Oh, you're talking about Japanese school.

JU: Yeah, yeah. In camp they had opened a Japanese school for us. They thought we all going back to Japan, that's why we had to study Japanese. [laughing]

FS: And the California students were very good in Japanese?

JU: Yeah, not like Hawaii kids, you know, and they lose us way behind. [laughing]

FS: How about English school?

JU: English school, too, we were behind, because they were so good. We were all mixed. We had only three Hawaii camps. Over 2,000 people were taken from Hawaii, but only three blocks.

FS: So you were a minority.

JU: Yes. The rest were all Mainland people.

FS: Do you have any special memories of high school?

JU: We were taking art, things like that.

FS: Any exhibitions?

JU: It's a wonder they gave us a diploma, were even able to graduate. [laughs]

FS: Oh, you did? Do you still have the diploma with you?

JU: No, I don't have it. I think I lost it. I moved so many times, I lost many things.

FS: You must have had a lot of socials, then? Other activities, sports?

JU: We had sports, and we had baseball and football. And at Jerome, the USO would entertain us, the Shelby boys.

FS: That's a high school group?

JU: Yeah. And the older ones too.

FS: Does that mean that you went to Shelby?

JU: No, the boys would come to our camp. Furloughs. They didn't have money to go to other places. Then they would come and visit our place. There was another camp, Rohwer, and then Jerome, were the two places. But Jerome had more Hawaii people, so Hawaii soldiers would come here. We had dances for them and entertainment for them. I heard some of them took Hawaii Japanese school to entertain the GIs, but I didn't have anything like that. [laughs]

FS: I guess the food would be controlled, so they would have to be at the mess hall.

JU: Yeah, at the mess hall. I guess the ladies enjoyed the camp, because we didn't have to cook, that's the reason we liked....

FS: Oh, the mothers.

JU: Yeah. Somebody do it for you.

FS: Did you eat as a family at the mess hall?

JU: No everybody spread out. Many of the families did that. I think I ate with a different family, my friends...

FS: What did you do in your spare time?

JU: Go hiking in the woods, pick mushrooms. You know *kikurage*, they call that. They had lots of that in the mountains. We used to go pick that. That's the only thing we can do. But we cannot all go one place, we cannot go out, the MPs are watching you. [laughs] The only thing, we didn't like it, so uncomfortable. They always watching us from the tower. They had guns. So no freedom. There's no stores, no nothing. So, we can't do much.

FS: So you never really got a chance to go beyond the barbed wire.

JU: No. But only once --- that time our parents were not united yet. So, once they let us go to Oklahoma. That's where my father was.

FS: Oh, I see, then, you did not see your father....

JU: A year, year-and-a-half or so, long time we didn't see him. They were in here and there. All different camps, they told me. They didn't find us until April.

FS: Would you say toward the end of your two-year stay?

JU: Yeah, yeah. Year-and-a-half or around there, they joined us.

FS: Do you know if there was any communication between your father and your mother during that time?

JU: No, no.

FS: When you were united...

JU: We didn't know what happened to them, we didn't know where they were. I know there were several camps, but we didn't know what camp they were, you know?

FS: When you say "they," who do you mean your father and your --- just your father?

JU: No my brother, too.

FS: Oh your brother. So actually, then, who went to Jerome? Just your mother and you?

JU: And my sister-in-law and the two kids. But, they joined us later, but...

FS: So, your brother, who was also a Shinto priest, was interned too?

JU: Yes, yes.

FS: Then from there...

JU: From there, they divided us. Some that wanted to go back to Japan, and some they were relocated or, I don't know what happened, but I didn't see them. Those who were going to go back to Japan, they were sent to Tule Lake, California.

FS: So then your father decided to go back to Japan?

JU: Yeah, and my brother too. In that camp -- *kibeis* (Japanese Americans educated in Japan) and those from Hawaii, too, the ministers -- they all wanted to go back Japan. They would talk about form one group. They called that the "*Wasshoi* gang," you know. They put the *hachimaki* over here [indicating forehead] and the Japan flag over here. And they would run around the block, saying "*Wasshoi, wasshoi! Tenno heika banzai!*" [Heave ho! Heave ho! Long live his Imperial Majesty!] They would run around the camp. And, so they would lock them up. They call that "stockade." And then "the bird run." They had next person already in line to be the leader, yeah? And then they do the same thing. The next person would take over. Then they would run around, really showing disrespect to the Americans, yeah, like America. Loyal to Japan, they acted like that.

FS: Were your brothers involved in it?

JU: Yeah, my brother was involved. [laughs] He was in *Wasshoi* Gang, too.

FS: Is this the brother here in Honolulu or the one in Nawiliwili? Which one?

JU: Nawiliwili. The oldest brother didn't go, by the way. He was old enough, and he was married and had two children. Like us, underage, so we had to go with our parents. But my brother was older, real old, so he didn't have to go, my older brother.

FS: Which one is this? The one in Honolulu or the one...

JU: Yeah.

FS: The one in Honolulu.

JU: Yeah, I was living with them before the war.

FS: Was he a priest too?

JU: No. No. He was just ordinary. He worked for the Pearl Harbor. So he didn't have to go. But my second brother, because he was a priest, so he had to go. He was one of the bad ones, the *Wasshoi* Gang. [laughs]

FS: Was he a leader among the group?

JU: Yes, yes.

FS: Did your father encourage that activity?

JU: No, no, he didn't.

FS: So, it was your brother's sole decision?

JU: Yes. He was brought up in Japan, too, and they were angry because they were locked up. Citizens, American citizens, this and that, you know? *Kibeis*, and those people, and stuff like, they were angry with Americans, so they acting like that. And so at that time, maybe one year we stayed in Tule Lake. From January 5, 1945 to November 15, 1945, then we came to Honolulu, but then...

FS: Actually, then...

JU: Before that, the war ended. But those people, disloyal people, they were deported to Japan, like my brother.

FS: Your brother did go back to Japan?

JU: Yes, he did. Took his family. There were many of them went from Hawaii, too, they went back. They were sent, in fact. [laughs] But then, they gave us choice, but --- if we wanted to go back to Hawaii or go back to Japan, you know. But, my father said we should go back to Honolulu, because if we go back to Japan, no sense go back because more mouths to feed. It's not good to go to Japan, because more people for Japan to feed. At that time, he told us that America is a good country, because they gave us choice. Any other country, he said, would not do that. They just going deport you, because you were in the group, the disloyal group. So, he said, "Don't go back. The U.S. is a good country."

FS: So it was his decision, your father's decision, to come back to Hawaii?

JU: Yes. Just my mom and I. My brother, of course, went to Japan. When we came back, we stayed with my older brother in Hawaii, Honolulu. I had to go out and work, because there was no church that would help you. [laughs] My father did not have any church to take over.

FS: So, you had no income at all?

JU: So I had to go out. There was Fair Department Store in Fort Street, you know? [laughs] I don't know if you remember, maybe you don't remember, you were too young, maybe, but that's where I worked. But then, we had nothing. We came back empty, almost empty-handed. The Red Cross or the welfare, I don't know where, you know. But they gave us money to buy bed and a drawer, you know, for put things inside?

FS: Where? Things inside where? In the house?

JU: Yeah. They gave us...

FS: At your brother's?

JU: Yeah. No. Because we cannot stay with him forever, yeah? We had to move out. So, they told us, when we ready to move out, they gonna give us some money to buy those things. We were so lucky, yeah? They gave us money to buy some refrigerator and stove - - but they said to buy the cheapest things -- and a dining room set and bed and drawers and *tansu*, I don't know what you call it. [laughs] They were good to us. To me, I don't have no grudge against America even though they did wrong, but....

FS: Do you remember anything about your return trip?

JU: We came back on one Army transport to one small boat. And was so rough, I remember. The older people were seasick. They couldn't eat breakfast or anything, so they told the young ones to get the food for them, and we were sick, too. Coffee cups like that were rolling down, was so rough. Small boat, had to hold on to the cups, I remember that. Going time was smooth, was nice boat, but coming home time was small. Transport boat, so it was rough.

FS: Do you recall how many days it took you?

JU: About five days, I think.

FS: I guess it's safe to assume that your father was interned because of his occupation.

JU: Yes.

FS: And you were interned because you were also an alien.

JU: Yes. I was underage, so I had to follow my parents.

FS: One of your brothers remained in Hawaii, because he was a citizen. The other was a citizen...

JU: He was a citizen, too...

FS: ... *but* he was a Shinto priest.

JU: Yeah.

FS: I see. Do you have any other memories of your internment that you would like to mention?

JU: Only thing. We had no freedom, that's the only thing that bothered us. Other than that, we were young, so we kind of...

FS: Managed.

JU: Yeah, managed. And, I think, kind of enjoyed ourselves. [laughs] Not too bad, you know?

FS: Is there any message you have for the younger generation, which has never experienced something like what you went through?

JU: I have something written down. Can I read it?

FS: Yes.

JU: It was the biggest mistake of America. It was racial prejudice. No one should be deprived of their constitutional rights. I want the young generation to remember this and fight for your rights. And, don't let this happen again. On the other hand, America had many wonderful qualities. You should be proud to be Americans, and be a good citizen.

FS: Thank you very much for your interesting story.