JAPANESE CULTURAL CENTER OF HAWAI‘I

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

MURIEL ONISHI (MO)

May 20, 2005

BY: Florence Sugimoto (FS)

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

MO: I am Muriel Chiyo Tanaka Onishi and I was born in Hilo, in Hawaii, on March 6, 1921.

FS: Please give us your parent’s names, year and place of birth and the circumstances which brought them to Hawaii and their occupation.

MO: My father was Takasuke Tanaka. I think he was a news reporter when he came to Hawaii from Takamori City, Yamaguchi-ken, Japan. My mother’s name is Haru Wakimoto and she had graduated from Hiroshima Jyogakuin. She graduated and came to Hawaii looking for her brother, Kashiro Wakimoto in Hilo. And he recommended that she teach in Hawaii because she’s a graduate of Hiroshima Jyogakuin. She was teaching at Olaa Japanese School and then she was transferred to Hilo Dokuritsu Gakko, pricipal Yoshio Shinoda, and stayed in their cottages.

FS: Please tell us how your father came to Hawaii first.

MO: I really don’t know exactly but I think he was with the newspaper. He was a news reporter, came to Hawaii, and that is not very clear to me but he was here and my mother came, after graduating from Hiroshima Jyogakuin. She had contact with Dr. Minoru Shinoda’s father and mother who had a school in Hilo. And so she lived with them and taught the girls at Mr. Shinoda’s school, Hilo Dokuritsu Gakko, teaching Japanese crafts, flower arrangement, etc. It was there, during that period, she had an opportunity to meet my father. They were married while she was still teaching. I was born during that time.

FS: What was the language spoken at home?

MO: Japanese. Strictly Japanese.

FS: And then I take you all observed many of the Japanese cultural events in the home.

MO: Yes.

FS: Could you talk about some of them?

MO: Well, we observed all the Japanese national holidays and anything Japanese came naturally at home.

FS: How many children were there in the family?

MO: I had my brother, Akira. Another brother was born but he died of pneumonia in the later years. So it's just my brother Akira and myself today.

FS: Were you considered dual citizens?

MO: Yes, those days we were all dual citizens.

FS: What was family life like?

MO: Well, my mother was strict Japanese, in fact, for example, I was always told that when you hand over something to somebody sitting down, you have to sit down and present it in both hands.

FS: You mean to the person.

MO: Yes. That was one example.

FS: I take it that you were very close since your father was home during the evenings, not like the plantation workers. So you must have had a pretty close family life.

MO: Yes. And then because my mother came from Hiroshima Jyogakuin, which was a Christian college, we observed, you know, prayed to God before meals. So with this Christian background, she encouraged me to go to Sunday School in Hilo. I remember going to the Episcopal Church—the Hilo Union Church--in Waiakea, where Rev. Higuchi was pastor. After Sunday School I would wait for my father and he would come and pick me up. My parents never went to church but I was encouraged to go, so that was the beginning of my Christian education.

FS: What was the neighborhood like?

MO: Well, after they got married, they were assigned to a Japanese school in Waiakea where my father was principal of the Waiakea Uka Japanese School. You know those places were divided into camps—Camp Eight, Camp Six—so he was assigned to Camp Six, and he was the principal there.

FS: What were the relationships like among the neighbors? Did you socialize a great deal?

MO: I was the principal's daughter, so we had to be careful whatever we did, and it was a discipline for me, but I was brought up that way, so it didn't bother me. I always thought that was the way.

FS: Did you play among yourselves in the neighborhood?

MO: Yes, we did.

FS: What was the make-up of the neighborhood?

MO: It was a close-knit neighborhood. I think my father must have been a strict teacher and my mother was the supporter at Camp Six, Waiakea Uka Japanese School, because to this day, every so often I meet people that say, "I went to your father's school and your father was so strict he put me in storage because I didn't listen. And I was yelling and crying and your mother came and helped get me out of there." This is one of the stories that to this day he talked about it and he's a member of Wesley United Methodist Church and there were others like Mr. Akamine, who also went to Waiakea Japanese School.

FS: What English and Japanese school did you attend before December 7th?

MO: I went to the Wahiawa Elementary School, and those days they didn't call it the kindergarten. They called it the receiving class. So I was in the receiving grade class and that's the supposedly kindergarten. And many of us had Japanese names. My name was Chiyo Tanaka. So the teacher gave us English names. And that's when she gave me Muriel. And there were Rosalee, Roselyn, and others, so my name was Muriel Chiyo Tanaka from that date (1926).

FS: What about the Japanese school? Which Japanese school did you attend?

MO: I went to the Japanese school that my father and mother operated, Showa Japanese Language School, after English school every day.

FS: This is before December 7th?

MO: Yes. I attended Wahiawa Intermediate School and then graduated from Leilehua High School in 1939.

FS: Do have any special memories of school at that time?

MO: My teacher during high school was a Virginia Summers. She later went to McKinley High School. She was our journalism teacher. She was so kind and she taught us all so much that I enjoyed studying journalism, and I even got appointed to be the *Star Bulletin* rural correspondence reporter, reporting local news. So it seemed like journalism was my minor. And I also liked art. So there were two things I was headed for but after graduating from Leilehua High School in 1939, I went to Japan, due to physical reasons, and my uncle took care of me in Tokyo. Earlier, my uncle from Tokyo came to help my mother when my father passed away in Japan and because she was all by herself and she had to assume as principal of the Showa Japanese Language School. That was another new beginning for me and for Showa Japanese Language School.

FS: That brings us up to your trip to Japan. This was in 1939. Why did you go and how? What other details can you give us?

MO: Because I was not well physically and my doctor here told me I had gall bladder trouble, he said, "You have to have surgery." But Japan's medical science was way advanced, so many people were going to Japan for surgeries and treatment, so I was one of them. I went to Tokyo and went into the Icho Byoin and stayed there for one month and doing the irrigation of the gall bladder, and cleaned out the gall bladder of all the dust and the stones. So I was able to survive without surgery. That's a well-known hospital right in front of JOAK Tokyo radio station. I'm not sure if it's still there.

FS: That would be Icho Byoin.

MO: "*Icho*" means stomach. That was a specialized hospital.

FS: What was the political and social and economic climate in Hawaii before you left for that trip? Do you recall?

MO: No. I wasn't very interested in those days.

FS: What was it like in Japan?

MO: Well, in those days, Prime Minister Tojo was very active and militaristic. After I got well, my uncle said, "Since you're here in Japan, go to school and learn, do something worthwhile." So I entered the Tokyo Women's Art College, which is now called Tokyo Women's Art University. And then I was there for three years when the war started on December 7, three months before graduation. And that's another story.

FS: Besides what you mentioned earlier, did you notice any… your life being different in Japan compared to Hawaii? Before December 7th.

MO: I found that there were so many opportunities in Japan. So many things were different. And my uncle was one of those open-minded persons. He used to take me to the kabuki, and took us here and there. When the cherry blossoms were blooming he would say, "Oh, let's go to *sakura-mi* [cherry blossom viewing]." Yes, he gave us lots of opportunities.

FS: Did you have any problems adjusting to Japan?

MO: No, because I grew up in a Japanese home, I had no trouble with adjusting. The only thing was, in my uncle's family, there were eight children so I was kind of helping the maid taking care of… and of course it was quite an experience for me too.

FS: Tell us about your experiences doing that.

MO: There were twin boys, in fact they were born in Hawaii, until my uncle had to go back. He was here as a news reporter and then they were not allowing school teachers to come from Japan anymore. He was here trying to help my mother as a teacher but he originally came as a news reporter from *Yomiuri Shinbun.*

FS: This was your uncle?

MO: My uncle. He was my mother's youngest brother. He came from Tokyo to help my mother.

FS: What was your home life like as sort of a maid's helper?

MO: There were eight children—four boys and four girls, or was it three girls and five boys? It was hectic but they all liked me. And I think we had a good time. My aunt, my uncle's

wife, came from a family of just one--she was the only daughter--so she was very strict and just wasn't used to children but they kept on having children. (Laughter.)

FS: On December 7th, how old were you, what were you doing on that day, your personal reactions…?

MO: I was 20½ years old. I was getting ready to go to school. It was about six o'clock in the morning, the radio was on, and they were blasting that *Gunkan* March [military march]. And then the announcement was coming really loud; it said "*Kongyo*. This morning at six o'clock... *teikoku kaigun*… they attacked Hawaii." It's a secret mission too. And then they bombed, "*Shinjuwan ni oite senkan nanseki bakuchin*," etc. They were announcing all the [American] ships that were sunk by the Japanese naval bombers that flew from the ships.

FS: What was your reaction?

MO: I was saying, now what? What has happened? What has Japan done? I felt terrible. But from that day, I tried to, because we were considered enemy in Japan, so walking down the street, I tried not to walk like an American. I painted my saddle shoes all black, instead of white and brown or white and blue. 'Those days saddle shoes were a fad. So going to school, I didn't want to look like a nisei or American, so I tried to, telling my friends at school, but they laughed at me and said, "But Tanaka-san, you walk like an American anyway. You walk fast and you walk so…" That was a big laugh about that. I tried not to show that I was an American.

FS: Did you encounter any problems?

MO: No, everybody felt sorry for me because my mother was in Hawaii and we didn't know what was happening to her, because at that time nobody knew what was happening, until one day, the Japanese newspaper listed the names of educators and religious affiliated adults that were being interned, destination unknown. And then it said Hawaii and America. And in the list of names I saw my mother's name and I said, "Oh my gosh, so this is what happened." And that was it. And six months later after the war had started, I got a letter from the Red Cross. I think it's in the book. It said, "*Haha buji*." "Mother is safe. Don't worry." That's all it said. And that was the Red Cross telegram message. And then months later, almost a year, I think, I got my first letter from her and her address was "alien camp." There is a picture of the letter I received from her in the book written by Tomi Knaefler titled House Divided.

FS: Will you describe what it said?

MO: Gee, I can't remember. It's one of the things I haven't read since but…

FS: Basically…

MO: That she's well and that they are really fed well, and they had lots of freedom, and according to her, she said they get so much allowance everyday, so they would put it together and then somebody would go out marketing outside the camp. So they were very generous to these internees.

FS: Do you recall how much it was that they received?

MO: I can't remember exactly. It's a very small amount, 25 cents or 35 cents a day. They also had food rations and not everyone ate what they received that day.

FS: But the people in her area pooled their money and…

MO: They would go out and buy…

FS: What did they buy?

MO: Most of them were Japanese so they would look for fish or things that ordinarily they don't get in rations.

FS: Does that mean they went out to town?

MO: I think there was a market someplace and somebody would drive them to the market so they could buy anything with the money that they put together.

FS: But they were also fed regularly by the government?

MO: Yes. Probably pork and beans and the regular rations.

FS: And so your first contact actually was in the form of a letter.

MO: Yes, the Red Cross confirmed it about a half year after the newspaper printout.

FS: First the Red Cross and then your mother.

MO: Yes, her first letter was labeled "Internee Mail" and certain lines were blacked out.

FS: What about any other contact through any other people?

MO: No, until I, of course that was my brother, but I had no contact, but I didn't know where he was for one thing. But after, gee, when was it? There was an exchange ship about three years, two years, after, and the ship's name was Gripsholm and then a bunch of people in the camp who wanted to repatriate, they wanted to go back, they didn't want to be Americans, they wanted to go back to Japan, so there were quite a few that did that.

FS: So your mother was not…?

MO: No, she was interned in a so-called "Federal enemy camp." But the most interesting thing was the beginning of my life was one day the train, somebody was standing on the Japanese *shosen* train [city trolley] and came up to ask me, "Are you a nisei?" And I said, "Yes." "Do you know a Mrs. Tanaka -- because I was in the same camp as Mrs. Tanaka." I said, "That's my mother!" And it was really, and her name was Jean Kariya, Jean Ito at that time. And so it was a real coincidence that I met her right on this *shosen* train. And then so when she said that it was a new beginning and we started to share what the things they… she was doing in camp. She said, "Your mother used to have a group of children." There were lots of children in camp because it was a family camp. It was the first Federal internees camp.

FS: Where would this be?

MO: First it was in Texas, a small desert town in Texas, but they were later moved to Crystal City, Texas, a Federal internment camp. The former internees are so organized; they mail out a Crystal City newsletter several times a year. During the war, in camp, my mother said, "Having all these children in camp, and letting them do nothing is not good for the children," so she said, "Let's start a school," and so she started this school, a Japanese language school with all the children and interned teachers.

FS: You got this information from Jean. When was this?

MO: This was when the exchange ship, the Grepsholm came back to Japan with those who repatriated to Japan. They were detained in a camp for several weeks.

FS: In Japan?

MO: Yes, in Japan. They were first treated like enemies in Japan – because the Japanese government couldn't trust them as they had returned an enemy detention camp. They

didn't know whether they were spies. And when they were finally released is when Jean met me one day and since I invited her home and I shared whatever she needed because she left with nothing from camp. So I would let her wear my clothes, and we became very close friends and to this day we are very close friends. She lives in New Jersey, across from New York. She's married and she has several children.

FS: So she returned from Japan to America?

MO: Yes.

FS: At the end of the war.

MO: Yes, she worked for the Occupation Forces in Tokyo since she was an American citizen. Of course there's another story how, just because we were there during the war, many of us lost our citizenship.

FS: Oh yes, please tell us about that.

MO: But before that I had to graduate from my art college. All schools' graduations were shortened to September the year before, instead of the usual March.

FS: And this is in what year?

MO: Gee, must have been… the war had started in 1941…

FS: 1943?

MO: '42 or '43. The reason is, not only women, but they wanted men to graduate from high school and college early too so that they can conscript them for their purpose… to send them to the war zone.

FS: So this made all the schools, including colleges…

MO: "*Kuriage sotsugyo*," they called it. Graduation time was earlier.

FS: So you graduated early.

MO: Yes. So after I graduated, my uncle said, somebody was looking--because I spoke English--they were looking for English speaking persons and the war had started. One day on my way to school, I saw a plane flying that was a U.S. reconnaissance plane that

flew over Tokyo. That was the first flight that came. That was in April. And we were watching the plane and that plane dropped a bomb someplace and some people were killed because they were not prepared for that first raid. That was the beginning of the war. Now the Japanese government is looking for English-speaking nisei. And I was one of the three women to be selected to monitor foreign short wave and long wave radio for the Japanese government at the general headquarters under General Tojo. So that's where I was hired. They called it "*bojuhan*." And they had conscripted many nisei from U.S. Mainland and Hawaii living in Japan too.

FS: Those living in Japan.

MO: Yes. Doing business or going to college and could be drafted into the Japanese military service, instead they were conscripted to do monitoring also. And it was a twenty-four hour monitoring. We would listen to General MacArthur's communiqué, Chester Nimitz' communiqué, and BBC, ABC, and New Delhi, etc. and all over through short wave, long wave, etc. And the government had already confiscated all the best radio sets from all over Japan. And in this room in a special building we had all our choice of radios to listen to, and we could hear Pearl Harbor's General MacArthur's communiqués and Admiral Chester Nimitz' communiqués every morning at a certain time.

FS: Was it your job to translate those?

MO: Because I knew Japanese, in my case, I did some translation when needed. They had translators from Japan, Japanese translators. They had volunteered or I don't know how they got there, but there were several. I have pictures of those too. While we were working, it was the best place to be because it was safe. And if there were air raids, we would hear the air raid siren… "Our (Allied) planes are coming." We had shelter right in the general headquarters. And that's the area America never dropped any bombs. They would drop bombs around them, the general headquarters, which was in Ichigaya, Tokyo, and it was the safest place in case of a raid and we went down into the shelter, way down so many steps. And the women worked from 7:30 to about 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon. And we all had bus passes, train passes that you can ride second class, if we wanted to travel on vacation, they gave us second class. We had special privileges and food was ample because they had confiscated from the farmers. The soldiers had the best – they had rice and all that, sweet potatoes. After the war I was still plump because I hadn't starved. And once a year, the Emperor would come to the general headquarters.

FS: And you said the Emperor would come one day.

MO: One day of the year. To say thank you to the members of the headquarters for doing what they were doing.

FS: Does that mean you all heard but not saw him?

MO: We saw the motorcade, and of course we're not supposed to look out. Our building was on the second floor so we can see but they told you, "Don't look down." But you see the Emperor's entourage coming in.

FS: Then where do you look?

MO: Well, we're not supposed to, but we were looking from the windows. (Laughs.) But on the day he came, we always had a special boxed lunch with the chrysanthemum emblem, *omanju* [bean jam cake]. But what I wanted to say was that we had the best.

FS: So you did very well, actually. What exactly did the monitoring of the communications involve?

MO: Mostly the daily broadcasts concerned announcements from the headquarters of General MacArthur, Chester Nimitz, and all around the world, ABC, BBC, and even India. And we had certain countries where we had to have short wave monitors and then so those were monitored by a special team away from the general headquarters and they were done by young men who were familiar with short wave.

FS: Exactly what did you do?

MO: We recorded all these communiqués. "This morning so-and-so planes, how many flew, 500 planes flew over London and flew so many sorties and dropped so many tons of bombs." That's the kind of information the general headquarters wanted.

FS: So after you wrote them down…

MO: Then the translators would write it in Japanese and then it goes to the headquarters. It's in another building.

FS: Do you have any other special memories of life during that period?

MO: Well, one thing is that, as I said, the three women that worked over in this special department were all nisei women; I was from Hawaii, one was from Canada, and another woman was from Sacramento, California. So three of us were there. The rest were all

men and then the typists were all Japanese girls. There was always Japanese army, probably Captains or personnel, supervising us in different areas.

FS: Now at the end of the war, how old were you and how did you react to the news that the war was over?

MO: Well, this was August 15, 1945. I must have been about 24 or 25 years old. The day before, a memo came saying there will be a very important announcement tomorrow so everybody should gather in the hall. So we all gathered and stood there and listened to the Emperor's announcement of unconditional surrender. That was it. There were some Japanese soldiers who worked with us, and they felt disgraced to surrender, so immediately after, we heard that they had committed *harakiri*. They couldn't face their families.

FS: What was your personal reaction?

MO: I said, oh we had such mixed feelings. We were happy and yet because we had gone through so much and because the planes were coming more frequently, we knew the war was getting closer to Japan. We knew. The people didn't know. But when we knew that it was coming closer, so we had to be evacuated from the general headquarters out to another area of the city.

FS: When was this?

MO: Oh, about six months before the war ended. But they knew, general headquarters knew, it was coming. And we were also told, in Russia when the war ended, the Russians attacked, raped the women, etc. "So all you women get out of the city, and don't come back to Tokyo until things quiet because the Americans are going to land." Those of us who were working at general headquarters were warned. Outsiders didn't know all this was happening. So my friends and I who worked together went to Nagano-ken where my family was evacuated. We went there and stayed there for two weeks. The Americans landed but all seemed quiet.

FS: Including…

MO: When I knew that nothing was happening and they had some good remarks about American GIs who are occupying the Tokyo area, we all came back to Tokyo. And then my friends that I knew in Hawaii who knew where I lived started to come and visit me. The GI friends started to come visit me, and one of them happened to be my future husband, Harold Onishi. When I decided to come back, because everybody was

leaving… The first ship that was leaving Japan was the General SS Gordon. It was a troop ship. It was a regular troop ship with the three deck beds, and the food was good and we had a good time. I arrived in Hawaii on July 9, 1947. In the meantime, because I had come back to Hawaii, the American consulate had reinstated my American citizenship.

FS: Did you have any problems trying to get back from Japan?

MO: No, I was told as long as I go to the closest American soil that would reinstate my American citizenship. In the meantime, I had written to the Japanese government that I wished to denounce my Japanese citizenship. And then, when I did that, they took my name off and then found out that American citizenship was gone also, so I was, for awhile, a foreign national. So there were many of us in Japan, foreign nationals, without any country, until we came back to Hawaii and reinstated my American citizenship.

FS: Does that mean that while you were in Japan you already had lost your American citizenship?

MO: Yes. Anybody who remained during the war had automatically lost American citizenship. So after the war, when we got the civilian job, we were considered as foreign nationals applying for a job with the American government when the occupation forces came. They the Civil Information and Education (CIE), the civil defense, CCD, etc. and they established offices in Tokyo and in the key cities of Japan.

FS: Now that you came back to Hawaii, what was the first thing you did?

MO: Well, when we arrived at Honolulu Harbor, it was such a glorious day and there were 8 of us who worked together in Japan and there were many others too, coming back to reinstate their citizenship too. And we were greeted by the newspaper and I had my friends there waiting for me. The first thing they did was to take me to a Japanese restaurant on King Street. I can't remember what restaurant it was, but the food tasted so good! I was eating Hawaiian Japanese food. And my mother was waiting for me at home in Wahiawa. She was so happy, "Oh, *yoku modotta ne!*" [I'm glad you're back!] So she was very happy. Going back to my mother, during her internment, she had left her Japanese language school building that I guess the government took over? And they had turned it into a social services building, so she had no place to go. But friends at that Wahiawa language school had taken her in and she was living with families, and when I got back, she decided to move into a cottage with me, and she was teaching flower arrangement, Japanese language, to the students whom she had left before. She had already started to teach them.

FS: Do you have any thoughts on the internment experience, although you were not actually interned?

MO: Well, my thoughts are that there shouldn't be any more war. We should really all concentrate on world peace. That's what I want to pass on to this next generation. Because I was the lucky one.

FS: What are your thoughts on the internment experience even though you were not directly involved?

MO: Well, I came back and my mother was very happy to see me and she was happy that I was all safe and sound. She kept saying how generous the American government was. Although they were interned, the U.S. Government took good care of the civilians--a place to live (internment camps), food, and allowances--during the war. A couple of years later my mother was one of the first ones to receive a big check from the government, and she really appreciated because no matter how, even in camp, they were fed well, they got their allowance, and they were not harmed at all. They were really well taken care of, in spite of the fact that they were enemy aliens. So I really appreciate what the U.S. government had done for them, and at the same time, I ducked many bombs in Japan… these are American Allied enemy bombs…but luckily I was safe and missed the Hiroshima A-bomb by about two weeks, although later I learned that my cousin and uncle were victims of the A-bomb while doing public service in the city. And my uncle who was the mayor of Etajima Island went to the city to look for his son. Breathing the atom bomb dust did not help and later he developed cancer and died.

I had gone to Hiroshima and on my way back, the bomb had fallen in one of the stations in Numazu, and I had to walk about two and a half miles from one station to another, but still I was safe. I was away from Hiroshima when the bomb fell. And then when I came back to Tokyo, that was the first big fire raid, that fire alarm that happened in Tokyo when half of the city burned down. That was April or May '45. That was the last time we saw the fireworks, the bombing. And then when the Emperor said, on August 15th, "This is the end of the war and we unconditionally surrender to the Allied countries." I was so relieved. Several of our nisei friends just hugged each other and cried. It was an emotional time. And then we said, "No more Hiroshima, no more war. We just got to work for peace."

FS: What kind of message do you want the younger generation to think about?

MO: That's the thing that we should not have these wars that continue. I think we should try to avoid, and stop the killing and negotiate peacefully. They should try to solve it instead of fighting. We should always work for peace—by understanding each other—praying for world peace.

FS: Well, thank you very much for your very candid answers to our questions. This concludes today's interview.