JAPANESE CULTURAL CENTER OF HAWAI'I

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Michael Munekiyo (MM)

January 5, 2017

Interviewer: Mel Inamasu (MI)

MI: Today is January 5, 2017. We are at the office of Mike Munekiyo to interview him about his father's internment experience. My name is Mel Inamasu, volunteer at the Japanese Cultural Center, and I'd like to introduce Mike. Can you give us your name, year and month of your birth and we'll go from there.

MM: I'm Mike Munekiyo, born in April, 1951. I grew up on Maui, went to school on the mainland, came back to Hawaii and have been on Maui again for the past thirty years. Most of my life [has been] on Maui.

MI: What's the name of your business?

MM: It's Munekiyo Hiraga. We are a planning consultant company.

MI: Tell us the names, birthdates of your grandparents, where they immigrated from, starting with your father's side of the family.

MM: My father's parents, both from Hiroshima, [were] Tameshiro Munekiyo and Misato Munekiyo. I think her maiden name was Uesagi. They came to Hawaii in 1919 or 1920, thereabouts, worked at the Pioneer Mill in Lahaina [Maui]. They were *Issei*. They decided to move back to Japan in 1926, so the whole family went back.

MI: They came here as plantation workers?

MM: My grandfather worked as an ice delivery man for ice boxes. He delivered ice to the different plantation houses.

MI: How about the other side of the family?

MM: My mom's parents, Hideso and Mutsuno Taketa, came from Hiroshima. They worked on the sugar plantation and later pineapple, Maui Pine. They came to work on the ag [agriculture] fields.

MI: Your father's full name and when he was born?

MM: My father is Toshio Munekiyo. He was born in July, 1921, in Lahaina. Again, went back to Japan [with the family] when he was five or six years old and then he came back to Hawaii in 1939.

MI: He went back because the whole family went back, not for education?

MM: Right. The whole family decided to move back.

MI: And he returned all by himself.

MM: By himself.

MI: Why did he come back [to Hawaii]?

MM: That I'm not sure, although the records that I researched seem to indicate that he just wanted to come back to Hawaii, something that he wanted to do.

MI: Was he a second or third son?

MM: Second son. That's part of the reason. On my mom's side, Shizue, she was born in January, 1920. She grew up here on Maui, finished school up to the sixth grade. My father, by the way, finished school up to ninth grade.

MI: Let's go back to your father.

MM: He was raised in Lahaina. When he returned, he went back to Pioneer Mill Plantation.

MI: In the field?

MM: He was an irrigation personnel. I'm not sure what he did. (Laughter) Apparently in the irrigation section of the plantation. That was 1939 and of course, then the war broke out.

MI: What's the story on your mother?

MM: My mom, as I said, she finished up to the sixth grade. She came from a large family, seven kids, so she went to work at that time as a house cleaner after she finished school. She continued working until her retirement. Long working career.

MI: How old were they when they met and married?

MM: They met in late 1949, after my father came back from the mainland. They married in 1950. I've got two sisters, Eileen and Karen.

MI: They were born in what years?

MM: 1953 and 1955.

MI: So, all of the children came after the war.

MM: Yes, we were pure baby boomers.

MI: How do you happen to know about your father's story?

MM: He never did talk about it. At one point, my younger sister said, and this came out of nowhere, "Did you know that dad was a No-No Boy?" I said, "No-No Boy, what is No-No Boy?" So, I had to look it up.

MI: How old were you then?

MM: I was old. I was in the dark because nothing was spoken about his past.

MI: If you were to guess, about how old were you?

MM: Probably forty-ish. But it never did occur to me that there was this label No-No Boy placed upon him and I really didn't know too much about it.

MI: So you just assumed that your father worked [all his life] and …

MM: (Laughter) So, I knew him from the time I could remember, my memory recall—that was it. He never did speak about anything beyond that. Neither did my mom. I'm sure she knew about it.

MI: What kind of person was he? Was he a happy man or was he serious and bitter?

MM: No, he was very, I would say, just like other *Nisei*. Really a hard worker, always had two jobs. Always two jobs. The basic kinds of jobs, too. He was a yard man and a baker's helper for a long time. As far as I can remember.

MI: What bakery?

MM: New Maui Bakery, on Vineyard Street. Actually, he worked for Nashiwa Bakery on Central Avenue but it had a fire [which] closed it down. Then he went to New Maui Bakery on Vineyard Street. He [would] work there early in the mornings, three o'clock till whatever, then come home early, then go to work as a yard man at different places. Then, he finally was able to get into the construction business. He became a carpenter. He was lucky.

MI: He learned the trade. He wasn't a skilled worker?

MM: Yes, he had to learn that. He worked for Nagamatsu Contractor. Then he got into the painting business, still construction related. He worked for Endo Painting for a long time. Very hard worker, even when working in construction, he continued working in the bakery. Long days.

MI: About how old was he when you learned about the No-No Boy issue?

MM: It was after he passed.

MI: After he passed?

MM: Yes, that's why I—that was twenty four years [ago] already.

MI: He passed when?

MM: 1993. So, to some extent, there's some amount of regret [that] I never knew.

MI: When he passed, did you find any artifacts in the home?

MM: No. Well, he did get the— every internee alive at that time got twenty thousand dollars, so he received that check. Redress. And, he got the letter, the apology letter.

MI: When he got the letter, did he tell you about the letter and the twenty thousand dollars?

MM: Yes.

MI: What did he tell you?

MM: Not much, except to say, "This is what I received." He didn't make a big deal out of it.

MI: At that point, you did not know about the No-No Boy. Did you ask him about it?

MM: (Laughter) I didn't know so I didn't have any context to ask any questions that were valuable.

MI: Did that [apology] change him in any way? Did he feel any better that he got this letter? Do you have that letter?

MM: I do have the letter somewhere. I suppose it did, I can't really say. I'm sure it had some kind of impact emotionally on him.

MI: How about this sister who told you about the No-No story? Did she ever talk to your father about this?

MM: Apparently she did. She had a couple of recollections about the fact that he had been interned, which is good. If she hadn't brought it up, I probably wouldn't have been as aggressive in researching in his past.

MI: How did she find out?

MM: I think, just talking story with him.

MI: So, your information is second hand, through her and through what you've studied?

MM: Yes. So after I found out, I did want to learn more, so I got all of his records from the National Archives.

MI: When you say, "All of his records," how did you do that?

MM: I requested it. Someone—there was this one lady who was really helpful and she's quite prominent in this whole arena of education and making people aware, Aiko Yoshinaga. She helped me quite a bit.

MI: She was at the National Archives?

MM: At that time she was at the National Archives. She's retired now.

MI: So you gave the story and you gave your father's name. She then went to look up whatever she could find?

MM: Yes. And she gave me a packet of information, like a summary. Back then, this was probably at least fifteen years ago, [she provided] hard copies. I got a lot of information. Very interesting.

MI: What have you learned from reading [the records]?

MM: I think, like everybody else, just the tragedy of it all. The tremendous disregard for human dignity, that whole process that people went through. I don't think that people understand, unless they really see what went on and experienced [it] first-hand, how wrong the process was and how people were just totally deprived of any human rights and dignity. That [was] the tough part.

MI: In the documents that you got, are there any personal things [included] or are they just government documents?

MM: No, it's all government documents. But the thing that I think is striking is that they've got transcripts of his FBI interview before his arrest. They've got transcripts of what they called Board of Officer and Civilians, which is a secondary interview process.

MI: These were on Maui or Sand Island?

MM: On Maui.

MI: The Maui Police or FBI?

MM: They were actually military personnel. The first interview before his arrest was conducted by military personnel. And it's noted that the FBI agent was unable to attend. So I'm guessing that under normal circumstances, you'd have an FBI agent as well as the military personnel.

MI: Did you get to see his actual words?

MM: Oh, yes. And that's the thing which I've kept to myself because it's— that's where this whole tragedy comes out.

MI: He couldn't understand why [this was happening].

MM: No. He was twenty-one years old and so, you get rounded up by these military guys and put in this room and then they start this interrogation process which, to me, was pretty harsh when you read it. And that's the whole unfortunate set of circumstances that—unless you read how people were treated, and you know, you've got—I don't know how many thousands of people went through this process that basically treated them like criminals. For no reason.

MI: Having read this, what is your impression as to why he specifically was picked up? And when was he picked up?

MM: The first interview, the military FBI interview, was June 29, 1942. Then he was arrested.

MI: He was not picked up on December 7?

MM: No. I'm sure they were doing all the scanning and trying to identify potential so-called enemy aliens. The fact that he was *Kibei*, I think that was—I'm sure they had full records of who came back to Hawaii [from Japan].

MI: It was not his work or activities [in the community]?

MM: No, I think it was because of the fact that he was educated in Japan. It was unfortunate that that was the primary criteria that distinguished those who came back from Japan from other American citizens. An American citizen is an American citizen, right? He was born in the United States.

MI: Versus the *Issei*, who were not.

MM: Yes, yes, right. The fact that he was an American citizen but unfortunately sent back to Japan and he got his education [there]. It was limited, ninth grade only. But it doesn't matter. The fact that he was *Kibei*.

MI: If you read through the words [in the documents], how do you sense he was reacting to all of what was happening to him?

MM: It's hard to say. It doesn't seem like there was any anger. I think it was because, you figure, that he was twenty-one years old. You're in a room with military personnel and they're asking you questions, some of which are difficult to understand because he only can speak pidgin English, right? And that was the other criteria, the fact that he spoke

pidgin English was a rationale for having him arrested. The fact that he cannot speak English, which also meant that he had a lack of American culture, understanding of American culture. The last sentence in that interview is a recommendation. The recommendation is in quotes, "He be taken." You go through his whole transcript and they ask you everything about your background and then …

MI: There is no explanation …

MM: No explanation, just "He be taken." That's the recommendation.

MI: Did you get a sense of how long this whole process [took]?

MM: I'm not sure. This one had a three page transcript so I'm guessing, maybe twenty minutes, a half hour. The thing is, the questions are totally skewed, totally skewed to—they know what they want to do from the get-go already. I don't know what the purpose [of the hearing was].

MI: Guilty until proven innocent?

MM: Yes, they knew. So, the line of questioning is basically one of just confirming that you are worthy of being taken. That's the unfortunate part of it.

MI: What year was it that you got the records?

MM: It must have been the mid-nineties. After he [had] passed away. After my dad passed away.

MI: Was your mom still around?

MM: Yes, she was around.

MI: Did you have a chance to talk to her [about the records]?

MM: No, I never did show that [to her]. She'd be upset.

MI: You didn't want to upset her.

MM: No. It's just tragic. The whole process was just tragic.

MI: How about your sister? Did your sister talk to your mom?

MM: I'm not sure if they did or not.

MI: So, you have no idea what was happening with your mom during this period.

MM: No. Kinda too bad.

MI: Were there any personal letters in that collection?

MM: No, not really. Except that there was one, when he was being transferred from Sand Island Detention Camp to Topaz. This was in the later part of 1942. He sent a telegram back to his family basically saying that he was okay. So, they just have the telegram, verbatim, the message in the telegram.

MI: Was it complete or was it censored with cutouts?

MM: It was complete. It was just short because all it was, and I'm sure—I don't know how it came about but I'm just guessing that they gave him an opportunity to send something back home. Short message.

MI: Tell us what you have learned in terms of the chronology of the events. In June of 1942, best that you can tell, he was picked up, interrogated and they decided to keep him. Where did they keep him?

MM: As best as I can understand, he was arrested on July 16 [1942]. The first interrogation was on June 29, 1942. He was arrested on July 16.

MI: So he went in for the interrogation and he went home.

MM: Yes.

MI: And, they arrested him later.

MM: Yes. I think after that, he was sent to Sand Island Detention Center.

MI: Did he ever go to the Haiku camp site?

MM: I don't think so. As far as I can see, the records say that he went straight to Sand Island.

MI: When did he get to Sand Island?

MM: I think right after that.

MI: Maybe July 1942.

MM: And then there was a separate hearing. That's the Board of Officer and Civilians—they called it to determine what they would do to the detainees as best I can make of the process, based on the records. So, there was another interrogation. Based upon that, they concluded that he should be interned. Then he went to Topaz.

MI: When was this, roughly?

MM: I think he was sent to Topaz in March, 1943.

MI: So, he was at Sand Island for eight or nine months.

MM: I'm guessing, a few months.

MI: He never wrote any diary or kept notes?

MM: No, I couldn't find anything. Although he had old photos that I …

MI: In the [records]?

MM: In the family photo albums. I couldn't figure out what these were so I actually— he had his own notes in the back. I took those photos down to a reverend at Wailuku Honganji and he interpreted it.

MI: Written in Japanese?

MM: Yes. Basically it was photos of his time at Topaz and Tule Lake.

MI: Is it photos of himself or with other people?

MM: With others.

MI: Not identified?

MM: He had names.

MI: Maui people?

MM: No, these were Japanese people [in the camp], I think. That's the only kind of personal information I could comment ((?)).

MI: When you were young, you never saw these photos?

MM: I saw them but I didn't think anything. I didn't know what they were all about.

MI: And, nobody ever discussed them with you?

MM: No. So that's interesting. There was one photo of—I think they referred to it as Abalone Hill in Tule Lake. That was in his collection. And, when I went this past year to Tule Lake, [I said], "There's the place." It's kind of a geologic outcrop, a small mountain. It looks like an abalone but when I saw that, [I thought,] "Oh my goodness, that's the picture I've seen in my father's photo album." It made the relationship. He also had another photo of a building burning in his photo album. Later, when we went to Tule Lake, we found out that it was part of the high school that had burned down.

MI: So he had a camera?

MM: Apparently, yes. I don't know how he got the pictures. Maybe [from] somebody else. (Laughter)

MI: Now that you know a little more about his history, were any of his friends on Maui that you know of interned? Did he stick with some [of them]?

MM: I'm not sure. I'm not familiar [with any].

MI: When did he go to Topaz?

MM: March, 1943.

MI: How long was he there?

MM: Not long, because shortly thereafter, they issued that loyalty questionnaire.

MI: Is it in the records that he said, "No, no"?

MM: Yes, I've got that questionnaire as well.

MI: What kind of person was he? Was he strong willed or was he a quiet man?

MM: He was more quiet, [kept] to himself.

MI: You would have no idea why he said no?

MM: That I don't know why. I suspect that it was— I'm sure that he was with others who were from similar backgrounds. I think, my guess is just the fact of how people got to where they were, the process of getting them to where they were, whether Topaz or Heart Mountain or wherever, it was just an unpleasant experience, I think, for them. And, of course, it was unpleasant for others too, who had to just pack up and be relocated. But to go through this added process of being questioned… The questions that came up both in the FBI interrogation and Board of Officer and Civilians, the questioning to a large degree, speaks to loyalty. Questions like, "Do you bow to the Emperor?" His answer was, "No, I don't bow to the Emperor." "Is your brother in the Japanese Army?" At that time, he didn't know, "He may be." "If your brother comes back as part of the Japanese [military] and occupies the highlands, would you help him?" Of course, his answer was "No" to all of those because everything, every question that spoke to loyalty, he

responded that he's loyal to the United States. So, that whole—I think for a lot of these people who went through "No," I just suspect that they were treated with disrespect, disbelief, that people never believed them. I just suspect that you've gotta have some masked anger or something.

MI: Some of the questions were tricky, like the second one. Are you willing to disavow loyalty to the Emperor? If you were never loyal to begin with, how can you say yes?

MM: Yes, right. And I'm sure most of the people didn't understand that. It's just that …

MI: Was he an intellectual man or a simple man?

MM: Simple, very simple. He was only ninth-grade educated. Blue-collar, hard-worker. But no matter what, people are human. If you're treated with disrespect for no reason that's understandable to you, I think you got to harbor some resentment. So, anyway, he answered, "No, no." (Laughter)

MI: From that point, when he answered the questions, "No, no," that's when he was transferred to Tule Lake?

MM: Yes, September, 1943.

MI: Did you have a sense of anything happening in either camp as far as interaction with other people? Being placed in the stockade?

MM: The only information that is contained in the records is the fact that he went to school in Tule Lake, Tri-State High School. We got his school records. They've got some paste-ups. I think he was a dishwasher there for whatever reason. I don't know what kind of dishwasher. There were several jobs. That's the kind of information in the archives.

MI: He had no siblings here?

MM: No. He had an older brother in Japan and a younger brother in Japan. Interestingly, my uncle in Japan that I did get to know, he did serve in the Japanese Army.

MI: Did he ever come here [Hawaii]?

MM: Oh, yes. All the time.

MI: And your dad went back to visit [Japan] after the war?

MM: Yes. They kept in touch. That's why I have fairly good, close contact with my cousins there.

MI: Your uncle is gone.

MM: Both of them are gone. My cousin's still alive.

MI: You ever talk about this kind of thing?

MM: No. But my uncle did talk about his experience in the war. One of his assignments was to clean up after the atomic bomb, in Hiroshima.

MI: Remember anything he told you about that?

MM: Just that it was very disturbing. All you see is death all around.

MI: He never developed radiation sickness?

MM: He did. He got compensated, I think, by the Japanese government.

MI: Did he get leukemia?

MM: I don't know. I'm not sure if he had any symptoms.

MI: He didn't die [at a] young [age].

MM: No. He lived a good, long life. But I think he, like many others by virtue of being there post-bombing, he was eligible for some type of disability compensation. Tough lives, these guys had.

MI: We cannot imagine.

MM: Cannot.

MI: How long was he at Tule Lake?

MM: I think until—he was one of the last to be discharged. It was in early 1946. That's when he went to Crystal City.

MI: He didn't come home?

MM: Crystal City. And then after Crystal City, he went to Seabrook Farms in New Jersey.

MI: As I understand it, the ones who went to Crystal City were the ones who chose to go back to Japan.

MM: It could be. (Laughter) It could be.

MI: Instead of sending them home, they were sent to Crystal City. It was a special camp.

MM: That's interesting, I didn't know that. It wouldn't surprise me.

MI: He would then be abandoning his wife.

MM: Oh, no. They weren't married yet. I think they got married in early 1950.

MI: No wonder that your mother didn't know much about this.

MM: Yes.

MI: What have you learned about Crystal City and Seabrook Farms?

MM: I don't know too much about Crystal City but I understand that Seabrook Farms was just needing labor for the ag [agricultural] activities. That's about all I know.

MI: When did he finally come back to Hawaii?

MM: I think he came back in 1949.

MI: When was he paroled from Crystal City?

MM: I'm not sure.

MI: So, you've never talked to him about [any of this]?

MM: No. That's part of the regret. I got into this a little too late.

MI: As a family, you and your sisters, are you trying to learn more or have you reached a dead end?

MM: It’s a constant search.

MI: Where do you go from here?

MM: One of the reasons my wife and I went to the Tule Lake Pilgrimage (2016) …

MI: Tell me about it. How did it happen?

MM: I don’t know how I learned about it. I was just doing my own personal research on the Internet. That was at the site, although most of the sessions were at Klamath Falls. Discussion sessions.

MI: What kinds of things did you learn?

MM: I think, the fact that to have so many people there who actually were interned, still living. In their nineties. Kids who were there [internment] who are still living, eighties and nineties.

MI: Did you get to talk to them?

MM: Oh, yes.

MI: Did any of them know your father?

MM: No. Just internees. Thousands of people there. But the fact that they can tell stories first-hand about the mistreatment at Tule Lake …

MI: What kinds of stories?

MM: People being gathered in the middle of the night. Called out of their barracks only to be told, “Don’t try to escape” and then go back [to their barracks], for no reason. And I think, just the personal accounts of what occurred there, people telling their stories.

MI: Are these people still bitter about the experience?

MM: No, I didn’t get that impression. Some of them may be but I think more are interested in telling the story, preserving stories so that, hopefully, it doesn’t happen again. Without the understanding of how tragic the whole process was, then people are not going to understand. If you don’t tell people, then it’s easy to come about again. This whole rhetoric that we had this past [presidential political] campaign, just gets you pretty close to that kind of thinking. That’s kind of scary, for me.

MI: Who were some of the keynote speakers there?

MM: I don’t recall their names specifically. I can get you that information. George Takei was there.

MI: Have you seen *Allegiance*?

MM: I did, here, on Maui. Early December [2016].

MI: What did you think about it, the video of the Broadway performance?

MM: I liked it. I think I learned some. It just reinforces the notion of the great disregard for human dignity that comes across. I also went to see—in Portland, they had this play on Gordon Hirabayashi. That, too, reinforces the inequities and the grave injustice that was placed on people. For me personally, I still want to learn more.

MI: Has this changed your life?

MM: I think it has changed my—it gives me much greater appreciation for what I have today, the fact that the previous generation was subject to such mistreatment and yet, I feel comfortable with where I am in terms of my own family, my livelihood and so forth. You can come from a background where people were viewed as criminals and yet at the end of the day, you can work your way through, if you choose to, to have some degree of self-satisfaction that you made something worthwhile of yourself.

MI: Do you think that you are what you are because of your father? Were you raised with him telling you what to do? Telling you to *gaman*?

MM: No, he was never like that. He was more by example, the fact that he worked so hard.

MI: So, you grew up knowing that you would have to work hard also.

MM: I think, through observation and the fact that he and my mom sent three kids to college.

MI: How did they afford to do that?

MM: That's the question. (Laughter) At one time they had three of us in college, for one year. I said, "Geez." I think they just worked hard and saved. My mom was a cashier at Ooka supermarket for a long time. My dad was a painter for a long time. I think they were smart at saving because they knew that they had to do it for the kids. I think, for that generation, they didn't want their kids to [go through] anything like they had to go through. That, to me, is clear. Just placing tremendous value on that [education] and making sure that the kids got college education. Huge. I think that's the kind of lesson that I've observed. I think the fact that, at least on my father's side—I'm not sure if it was pretty tough on my mom's side too—the fact that he went through this wartime experience even strengthens my resolve to want to pass the word on to my kids. They're one generation removed and so I don't want them to forget [that] whatever benefits that they perceive as having, that it didn't come from nowhere.

MI: You've talked to them?

MM: Oh, yes. Definitely.

MI: Are you the one teaching them or did they learn some of that in school?

MM: I think they learned some of it on their own. They've done their own research, both of my daughters.

MI: How old are they?

MM: Thirty-two and twenty-nine. But I don't think that it's enough. They understand the history; I don't think they understand the full impact of what their grandfather had to go through. I think once people understand, [that] if they see something that's wrong, just from a moral or constitutional standpoint, they'd better say something about it.

MI: For your own personal life, given what you've seen going on [in the country], especially what we're seeing on religious discrimination, picking on Muslims, do you feel at this point that learning about your father has changed how you're going to respond?

MM: Oh, yes. Definitely. I think it's kind of sad that the rhetoric has gotten so bitter toward a particular group of individuals based on their beliefs. When you look at how folks of my

father's generation had to go through, just by virtue of reading the transcripts, interrogation transcripts, so much of it was religious based. The questions like, "Are you Buddhist? Are you Shinto? Who is God?" Back then, of course, you can understand, in the 1940s, the fact that if you're Buddhist or you believe in Shinto or anything that is connected with the Japanese religious background, that already [meant] one strike against you.

MI: These were not standard questions? They were dependent upon the person questioning you.

MM: I'm not sure whether they were standard. A whole bunch of questions spoke to religion. Are you Shinto? Are you Buddhist? What's the name of your church? You go to church? All of that [was] truly religious bias and the fact that you're not Christian and you're Buddhist or Shinto, strike one against you.

MI: What was he?

MM: He said he was Buddhist. Then, of course, you add on the face you wear, that's strike two against you. Then you tell me you're raised in Japan, that's strike three. There's nothing else to say except, "You shall be taken." I think from a religious standpoint, it's really increased my sensitivity to the kind of rhetoric that we hear nowadays, that it's kind of alarming. Sad. Sad. Too bad.

MI: Any other thoughts or reflections you might want to add?

MM: I continue to try to learn more about the whole experience, the whole internment experience. I probably want to do more. I'm involved in community stuff quite a bit right now, maybe try to do more if I can. I still want to come into the office.

MI: Thank you.