

JAPANESE CULTURAL CENTER OF HAWAII

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Reverend Thomas Okano (TO)

July 17, 2018

Interviewers: Melvin Inamasu (MI) and Les Goto (LG)

Note: Comments in brackets [] are by the transcriber. Inaudible words or sections are identified by ((?)) in the transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability.

LG: Today is July 17, 2018, and we are at the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii [JCCH] Conference Room, and we are here to interview Reverend Thomas Okano. My name is Les Goto and the other interviewer is Melvin Inamasu. So, maybe we can begin by you giving us your full name, your month and year of birth and where you were born.

TO: Okay. My name is Thomas Ryoju Okano, and I was born in, well, I guess I can say Pearl City. The doctor's office I was told was in Waipahu, but my home, my parents' home was [in] Pearl City, Oahu, [on] August 2, 1937, so a couple of years before the war. My father was *kaikyoshi* [missionary] or Hongwanji minister at the Pearl City Hongwanji. So that's where I was born and I grew up [there] until age four, close to five.

LG: Do you know what part of Japan your father was from?

TO: My father and my mother, my parents were both from Tottori *ken*, which is the other side, the back side of Okayama and Yamaguchi, facing the Japan Sea. Across the ocean is Korea.

LG: Just kind of briefly tell us about growing up in Honolulu or in Pearl City.

TO: Well, I was born in Pearl City and grew up [there] until 1941, when the war started, with the Japanese Navy attacking Pearl Harbor—which is a stone's throw from the Hongwanji. We're right there. I don't quite remember, but I was told that—well, I hear two stories. I was outside in the yard playing with my sister—one year and a half younger than I am—and we were actually watching the Japanese plane flying by—almost [at] the temple roof level—to drop the torpedo and fly up. Another version I heard later is that we were, maybe it was later on, but I was told to come in the house, and I spent most of the time within the house. So, I did not have that much of an opportunity nor memories of looking at that plane exactly.

LG: How many siblings did you have?

TO: I have a sister and later on, a younger brother.

LG: So, at that time, it was just your sister and yourself?

TO: Yes, just two of us.

LG: Is the temple still there?

TO: The temple is still there and actively serving the community there.

- LG: I'm not familiar with the temple. Subsequent to that, do you know anything about the experiences of you and your family?
- TO: Well, like any Japanese experience at that time, especially temple families, the temples were completely closed. By, I suppose, the military or the government, anyway. There were no Sunday activities at all. In fact, there was no, I think we were not allowed to have big gatherings in the temple grounds—only limited to a certain number or people—small groups of people. So, actually, the activity of the temple completely came to a halt.
- LG: At what point was your father arrested?
- TO: Oh, that day, that evening.
- LG: On December 7th?
- TO: My father—December 7th—actually the exact date—December 8th that we Buddhists consider very special, as the date that Shakyamuni Buddha, founder of the Buddhist movement, attained Enlightenment. We call it Bodhi Day. All Buddhists at the temple—the ministers would have a special occasion to commemorate that special day. So, on that December 7, which was the Sunday closest to December 8th, my father was attending this Bodhi Day service here at the Pali Highway temple, the main temple. We call it Hawaii Betsuin. My father witnessed the bombing of Pearl Harbor from the steps of the Betsuin temple, across the city of Honolulu. It took him quite a while to return to Pearl City after the service was over. I'm not sure whether the services were conducted until the end or not, you know. By the time my father returned to Pearl City Hongwanji, we had already left the property together with the people nearby. We [had] moved, evacuated up the Waimano Home Road, the single road leading up to Waimano Home which was [at] the top of the hill at that time. Both sides were all cane fields, and we were kind of resting alongside the road. My father—after seeing the note at the door which my mother had left—he came to look for us and he found us. But that evening, the MPs in the Jeep came looking for my father and that's when my father was taken away from us.
- LG: Was your family told to evacuate, or did they just evacuate because of safety?
- TO: Well, because of the safety. Everybody was moving up in the hills, so we were asked to join them and move up.
- LG: So, when they arrested him, where was the family located?
- TO: He was with us.
- LG: Up the hill?
- TO: Up the hill and in the cane field road. The MPs were looking for him. I was four years old and I kinda recall faintly, when my father came and found us on the road, I ran up to him and jumped on to him. That little incident still clings to my mind. We were together for a while and then the MP came and took him away.
- LG: You were just on the side of the road? No shelter?
- TO: No shelter at all. I believe we spent the night there or that evening we moved to Waipahu and spent the night there.
- LG: Was that the temple in Waipahu?
- TO: That I'm not so sure. Maybe it was the temple, Waipahu Hongwanji.

LG: Then, did you move back to the Pearl City temple?

TO: Yes, several days, maybe a few days later we were told it's safe to return to Pearl City, so we returned to Pearl City.

LG: Did you know where your father was? Was he sent to Sand Island?

TO: Eventually, but at the moment, he was temporarily held at the Immigration Center.

LG: Oh yeah, Immigration Center.

TO: On the Ala Moana Boulevard, together with the other ministers, of course. But my mother was left in the dark. Nobody told her where my father was and when that happened, the rumors started [to] spread out. Maybe they were all killed and dumped somewhere in Red Hill, something like that. (Chuckle) But about a week later, my mother said she received a call and was asked to bring some change [of] clothes, underwear and some fresh clothes. She was not able to meet him when she went to see, she brought the clothes, but she knew at that point that he was not killed. He was still alive.

LG: She wasn't able to speak with him?

TO: No, they took the clothes and just went [away]. Eventually, everybody was moved to Sand Island.

LG: At what point did you know, or had you found out, because obviously you were so young at the time, when he had left Sand Island or where his location was subsequent to that? Do you know when the family found out?

TO: Well, I'm sure my mother was kept informed, what happened, and when he was together with the rest of the ministers, sent over to the mainland. But I wasn't aware of those things.

LG: Do you remember anything about the decision to go and join him or when the decision was made, what the family went through in preparing for the trip?

TO: According to my mother, the word came to all these families that they have [a] choice, either to join her husband and our fathers in the camp or, stay back in Hawaii until [the] end of the war, which was uncertain. Some families, some older families preferred to stay back with the children. But the young families, well, they have no choice. They have no means of income. The temple was closed, so no choice but to join their husbands. So, my mother was one of those young families with two kids, four and three. She had no way to support herself.

LG: The family had no income so pretty much there was no choice.

TO: Yeah, and, that was the case with the rest of the families, too. I'm sure about that.

LG: So, what happened? Do you know anything about the trip over and where you folks went to and...

TO: Well, I was told there were two ships that took us to the mainland, and we were one of those ships and I think we landed in San Francisco. From there, we got on the train, and we did not go directly to the camp because the camp wasn't really ready, yet. The potential residents of the camp, the young parents, the young fathers, were sent earlier and they were building the camp, actually. I'm sure, the facility was already there but the interior, additional building structures and so forth—none of them had any skill, but they just pitched in and got the place ready for the family to come. In the meantime, we were treated very well, very well. Instead

of going straight to Texas, Crystal City, which is the internment camp site, we first went to North Carolina. What was the place?

MI: Grove Park Inn.

TO: Grove Park Inn, that was the hotel. Very fancy resort hotel. Even for little kids like us, we thought, "Wow, this is great." (Chuckle) Looking out the window, there's the rolling hills and the rabbits were running around and it's pretty nice. That's the extent of my memory of the place. After several weeks of staying there, eventually we were relocated to a little, less expensive hotel and eventually we joined our fathers in the camp.

LG: Did you go up to New York or New Jersey?

TO: All this time, I thought it was New York Harbor but when I was talking with this professor at the University of Hawaii, the name just slipped off my mind, but he's a retired history professor. He said, he specialized in this kind of thing, to his memory there was no ship leaving New York on this exchange program. The ship must have left [from] New Jersey. It doesn't make any difference to me: anyway, East Coast. We were placed in a Swedish ship.

LG: I mean, prior to going to Crystal City, after Grove Park, was that the only main stop that the family made?

TO: That and plus the less expensive hotel. Just two places. But it was quite a long wait.

LG: When you and your family met your father in Crystal City, [do] you remember anything about that and also, the experience of you and your family in Crystal City?

TO: Well, I was just about five years old, so I don't have that [many] clear memories of that place, but it was a desert. I know it was a desert, and rattlesnakes and things were not uncommon. Other than that, I don't recall too many incidents or experiences, pleasant or unpleasant.

LG: You remember anything about the swimming pool there?

TO: (Laughs) Swimming pool, I don't call it [a] swimming pool. There was a pond or lake. One day, I was returning from somewhere and people were draining that water hole. I was standing by the edge and looking, and the water receded towards the bottom and at the bottom, the dirt, muddy areas, I see something wriggling there. I wasn't sure until I looked closer and sure [enough] they were all water snakes. (Laughter) I was far away so it didn't scare me, but I was looking at them.

MI: There were many of them at the bottom?

TO: Yes, many wriggling. That's one of the incidents that kind of remains in my mind but it wasn't a swimming pool, it was just a pond-like. There was a separate swimming pool.

LG: How long was your family at Crystal City?

TO: We weren't there too long. Camp life wasn't that long: less than a year, maybe less than half a year. We were, for some reason, our names were chosen as one of several for return, exchange program, prisoner exchange.

LG: Did the families know that it was a POW exchange, at that time?

TO: Well, apparently my family, my parents knew. But it didn't make any difference. For them, we get to go back to Japan. That was the thing. Those who were not selected were really disappointed. They had to stay back in the camp until Heaven knows when the war comes to

an end. At least, we were moving. Whether it's good or bad, I'm not sure.

LG: Did the families elect to go back or were they chosen?

TO: We were chosen and my father agreed. I'm sure my father had [a] choice to refuse but there's no reason to refuse.

LG: Maybe if you could tell us something about the journey back to Japan.

TO: Well, journey back to Japan is a long journey, really a long journey. As I said a little while ago, we left New Jersey on the Swedish ship called Gripsholm. It was chartered by the United States government. We were American prisoners bound to be exchanged with them. We are prisoners held by the American government and bound to be exchanged with them, Americans held by Japanese. From New Jersey, we went down the East Coast. We didn't go straight to Europe but straight down the East Coast to South America, and I remember we stopped by Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Uruguay, too. I forgot that port's name, one of the famous ports over there. I understand, according to my father, they did pick up some Japanese internees, not internees I would say, maybe Japanese bound to return back to Japan.

LG: In South America?

TO: In South America. We went on to the bottom of South America, the tip of Argentina and there, we crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Up here was the war zone, Allies and Germany were fighting this side and the Pacific Ocean, of course, off limits. The Japanese were fighting the Americans. So, [at] the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean we crossed over to Africa, pass[ed] Cape Horn and entered the Indian Ocean. From there, we went straight up to a tiny territory. If you look at the Indian map, on the left hand side, west side of the Indian continent, there was a small territory called Goa, G-O-A. That was Portugal's territory, in the middle of India. I'm told that site was selected by both Japan and the United States for the exchange of prisoners because Portugal was still a neutral country at that time. They weren't involved in the war. So, we headed there and American prisoners on a Japanese ship, came from Japan and met us there. We were exchanged there.

LG: Do you know what date, what year that was?

TO: Year? Around 1943. I'm not sure exactly. Still, it was the height of Japan's winning the war, on every front.

LG: So, it must have been quite early in the war?

TO: Yes, early part or just about the turning point.

LG: Did the family have to wait in Goa?

TO: No, we arrived about the same time. We were treated like first class passengers on this chartered, Swedish cruise ship. But the Japanese government did not treat the American prisoners that way. They were boarded on a regular Japanese ship, fed *miso shiru* [soup] and rice. (Laughs) So, when they were exchanged, my mother recalled saying, always used to mention that young GIs ... you know, actually I remember we were exchanged like a herd of cows. There's a fenced bordered walkway and we were just—they're coming from the other end and we're coming from this end, and we just crossed and exchanged like this. And in the various corners, I remember Indian police or soldiers with their turbans on their head, standing like this, (points out) you had to walk that way. Little kids like us were considered one against grown up adults, Americans.

LG: So, it was like one for one?

TO: One for one, I was told, that's the exchange.

MI: What was that like? This is the first time I'm hearing this part. Was there any communication between the two groups? There's a fence between you [walking] in different directions?

TO: No, we can talk. In fact, my mother said, young GIs used to shout at some of us, "Hey, how's the treatment on the ship?" And they're asking, "You have apple, you have orange?" My mother said, "We have lots of oranges, lots of apples" and they were so happy to hear that.

MI: So, you would give them food then?

TO: No, no. They would get it when they get on the ship. In other words, they were treated shabby, not well, by the Japanese.

MI: How did they appear to you? Malnourished?

TO: I have no impression of what kind of condition, physical condition, they were [in].

LG: Then, you folks were herded up on the Japanese ship?

TO: Yes.

LG: Now, what was the experience on there? You know anything about that?

TO: From Goa, the first stop was Singapore, and it wasn't a long journey, maybe a day or two. When we reached Singapore, which [was] already part of Japanese territory, Japan had occupied up to that point. India was still not Japanese territory but the Malaysia peninsula, Singapore, Viet Nam, all that was already occupied by Japan. Singapore had its own Japanese name, called *Showa, Shonan to Showa*. *Showa* as in Emperor Showa and *nan* is *minami*, south. *Shonan to*, *to* means island. That was Singapore, the Japanese name. But nobody referred to that place as *Sho nan to*. Everybody called it Singapore anyway. (Laughter) Famous story about that is of course, the British big guns were all facing the ocean, preparing for a Japanese attack from the ocean. Well, the Japanese came from the peninsula, came down the long peninsula and just occupied the place. The city was intact and well kept. We were given—my father in Singapore was asked by the Japanese Navy to leave the ship to serve as the Navy Chaplain, for the Japanese government.

LG: In Singapore?

TO: In Singapore. So, we left the ship. So, we didn't go back to Japan directly. We stayed there. We left the ship and stayed in Singapore until 1945, the year the war ended—several months before that. So, when we landed in Singapore, Japan was still in the height of its so-called success in aggressive endeavor, winning the war here and there, conquering this place. The Philippines, Japanese pushed out MacArthur and so forth. Japan was still going strong—the height of Japan's power. Then, from that point on, we experienced the downfall of Japan, in Singapore.

LG: You could tell that Japan was suffering, going down?

TO: Oh, yeah. Towards the end, we experienced the Allies bombing of Singapore.

LG: Just to back up a little bit, do you know the experience of the families on the Japanese ship, from Goa as contrasted to the experience on the Gripsholm?

TO: I, somehow, I never heard much about that from my parents. Me, I have no recollection of how it was, how bad we were treated. For some reason, I have no recollections. Anyway, from Goa to Singapore is not a long distance. So, we didn't stay onboard that long.

LG: Then, in Singapore, what was life-like?

TO: Well, when we first landed there, we were given a pretty nice residence up [on] the hill. I was told, some of the British Isles officials or military officers used to occupy those places. Nice houses. We had a maid. We had another guy [who] does the yardwork and things like that. All at government expense. Japanese government expense. So, we were treated well.

LG: Was there a temple for your father?

TO: There was this temple, Hongwanji temple called Shonan Hongwanji, Singapore Hongwanji. My father was [a] Navy Chaplain but also attached to the Hongwanji there.

LG: How did the war end in Singapore? What happened in Singapore when the war ended or just prior to the surrender?

TO: In my young kid's memory, it was from heaven to hell kind of an experience. Height of luxury until barely able to live [in] Singapore. Within less than two years.

LG: So, what kind of things? Was there a shortage of food?

TO: Shortage of food, we didn't experience that much, but in terms of living and lifestyle first of all, and constant bombing. While in Singapore, I was enrolled in Japanese school, first grade. April 1 is the school year in Japanese education system. So, April 1st we went to school, run by the Japanese government, Japanese style, strictly Japanese style. That day, we had another air raid. School had to [be] canceled right away. They called, contact[ed] the parents and ask[ed] them to come and pick up the kid. Some parents came early, some fathers, like my father, came late. So, by the time he came to pick me up, I had already left school. The school closed and then they let the kids out. I had to walk home by myself. At that time, a few days prior to that, we had moved house, one area to another area. Somehow, I was able to find my way back home. But I remember the bombing of the city of Singapore. I just weaved here and there and made it back home. I remember one incident while going home. One young fellow on, I think was a bicycle, he asked me to get in the back, "I take you back home." He said, "Hop in the back." Something told me I'd better not. So, I said, "No" and just kept on walking. Historically, we know that when Japan occupied Singapore, they resumed the lifestyle that the British left, which is to use the local people as their servants. So, local Malaysian and Chinese had [a] lot of resentment against Japanese. Eventually, they became thankful to the Japanese for chasing the British [out] and they attained their independence later. All the countries, Viet Nam, Thai and so forth. But at that time, there was tremendous opposition to...

MI: You mentioned Japanese schools. Were there many Japanese civilians there in Singapore? Was that from before the war that they came?

TO: Oh, yes. Plenty. During the war.

MI: Civilians were coming from Japan to Singapore.

TO: Yes, to work for the military and the civilians, too.

MI: I was wondering why they had Japanese schools. I envisioned just Japanese military had occupied...

TO: No, a lot of civilians were there. Some strictly private civilians. Big companies would send people there. Some military connected. Interesting story but there were Army connected civilians and Navy connected civilians. Civilians had nothing to do with it, but the military people always are like this. Army versus Navy kind of thing.

MI: How did they treat the American Japanese, those Japanese civilians?

TO: For them, Japanese were simply Japanese. There was no American Japanese there. We were Japanese but it didn't make any difference. My parents were Japanese. So, we were kids of Japanese. For them, for the American Japanese government, we were Japanese, we were considered Japanese.

MI: Because you had re-patriated.

TO: Yeah. No, my parents were Japanese, so we were Japanese. That's it. (Laughs)

MI: From what I know, some of the families, the families were split. The fathers went on the ship to Japan, but the wives and the children were left in Singapore. Are you familiar with that situation?

TO: Yeah. Towards the end, that's what happened. Shall I talk about that?

MI: Sure, if you can explain some of that to us.

TO: Fast forward to 1945, early part of 1945...

MI: Before you get there, how about the beginning? As I understand the story, it was actually the first ship that was sunk. And yet, those families were split.

TO: First and only ship. That's called *Awa Maru*. I was supposed to be on that ship.

MI: What happened?

TO: If I were there, I'm not here. (Laughter)

MI: Why did you end up not being on the ship? Or do you know?

LG: Maybe you can tell us something, a little bit of the history of that ship that you told me a few weeks ago.

TO: Okay, that's right, I mentioned it to you. It's called *Awa Maru*. *Awa*, and all Japanese ships have the ending [name] *Maru* [Japanese for "circle" and attached to all non-warships to secure celestial protection for the ship as it travels]. Certain, certain *Maru*. So, *Awa Maru* was the name of the ship. This is towards the end of the war and the American government was well aware that American prisoners were not treated well by the Japanese government, in the prison, Japanese prison, which is well known. It's understandable because people in Japan, in general, were not treated well. Food was becoming scarce and things like that. So, I'm told that the Japanese government and the American government finally begin to negotiate. Not directly because they're at war, so they cannot talk. Through several countries and [they] negotiated to have Americans supply all kinds of needed goods for the prisoners: medicines, food and clothing and so forth. The Japanese government supplied a ship to transport this to all various prisons. The location where the Japanese ship was to pick up the goods was designated, in Siberia—something, something stock—Vladiostock or something.

MI: Vladivostok?

TO: Vladivostok, maybe that's the one. I can never remember those names. That's in Siberia. So, goods were sent through Russia to there. And Japan was to designate one ship to go there and pick up the goods and deliver. This ship was named *Awa Maru*. *Awa Maru* was designated. *Awa Maru* was given free pass everywhere. They can go and drop off these goods. This is almost towards the end of the war and Japan was totally surrounded by American submarines. Incoming ships, outgoing ships, almost all of them were sunk. Some were able to manage, but most met the fate of not making their destination. But *Awa Maru* has free pass, everywhere they want to go. So, *Awa Maru* picked up the goods and started dropping off the goods at all those various places the Japanese prisons were located, where American prisoners were staying. Supplies were dropped and the last stop was Singapore, way down there. By the time the ship reached Singapore, the ship was completely empty. Still, it has the free passage to Japan so what do they do? The Japanese government packed as much as possible, goods, on the ship: oil, rubber material. Some say there was a lot of gold and silver things. Plus, civilians. It was toward the end of the war and a lot of civilians wanted to go back to Japan. My father was also selected as one of those eligible to return. But the Japanese government says, "Only father and eldest son, two of you, can go home. The rest gotta stay back." The family is split, right? But my father was happy. He could go back to Japan. But my mother was really, really sad. She didn't know what was going to happen to them, later. Her and my sister and my brother who was born in Singapore, three of them. Anyway, my father was selected as one of the "lucky" ones, so we were on board. There were lots of people, deck full of people. I remember that.

MI: Fathers and first sons.

TO: First sons and fathers. But this is where the military rivalry comes in. That ship belonged to the Japanese Army. The Army cargo ship was the *Awa Maru*. The *Awa Maru* belonged to the Army. It was a Navy ship, and my father was assigned to the Japanese Navy. So, [an] announcement was made on board the ship that any civilians connected with the Japanese Navy, "Please leave the ship to make room for more civilians connected to the Japanese Army to come on." So, my father took my hand, and I remember walking down the gangplank.

MI: Sad?

TO: Sad. (Laughter). I see my friend walking up.

MI: Who was this friend?

TO: Asai, Asai. Mr. Asai was an Editor, I think, of the former *Hawaii Times* in Hawaii.

MI: Was it Asai or Asami?

TO: Asami, Asami. Yes. The son is several years older than I was. I was five or six and he must have been seven or so. We kind of went the same route, all the way up to Singapore, and we worked there. Apparently he was with more the Japanese Army side. He was going up and we came down. That ship, filled with goods and over two thousand Japanese civilians who wanted to go back to Japan, left Singapore and [with] supposedly free passage all the way to Japan. Ended up off Taiwan, one trigger-happy American submarine commander just torpedoed that boat. I believe [there was] only one survivor of that incident. So, that's what happened. But one of the lucky boats that passed through the American network of submarines carried my father's letter, [which] he had written previously to my grandparents in Japan, informing them that he and his first son, which is me, would be returning on *Awa*

Maru. So, my grandparents in Tottori prefecture were happy. At least our son is coming home with the first grandson. A couple of months later, they saw in the newspaper, the *Awa Maru* was sunk off Taiwan and only one survivor. So, they did not receive any word from the government but through the newspaper, they knew that my father and I had perished in the war, off Taiwan. They had the funeral service for me and everything. (Laughs) In the meantime, my father became ill, malaria or something and the Japanese official in Singapore said, “Go back to Japan. We’re sending you to Japan,” on the medical ship. The medical ship also has special passage. It has a big, big white cross and light is always shining there, twenty-four hours a day, visible from a distance and it’s supposed to have a safe journey back to Japan, anywhere. We just, in the confusion towards the end of the war, we just got on together and stayed with my father.

MI: The whole family?

TO: Yes, the whole family. My mother was assigned as a nurse. (Chuckles) We just got on and we barely made it back to Japan. Prior to returning, you see, we stopped at Sasebo in Kyushu first, and then, the boat went to Kyoto. Oh, the name just slipped off my mind. Anyway, two places. Kyoto is closer to Tottori, so we didn’t get off the boat at Sasebo. But prior to entering Sasebo, there was a big air raid. The boat made a U-turn and stayed out in the ocean, the ship. A couple of hours later, we went back to Sasebo port, which was totally different from the little glimpse I had before the air raid began. Anyway, the ship didn’t stay there too long. After those who lived in the vicinity, Kyushu area, left the ship, the ship went up to Kyoto and there, we left the ship. We took the night train to Tottori where my parent’s home was. We left, we walked in the dark all through this narrow rice paddy road and barely made it to my father’s home, my grandparents’ home.

MI: But they thought he was still alive? I mean he had perished?

TO: Yes, [that] we had perished. They did not expect us to come back. What happened is that we had this opportunity to get on the ship, the hospital ship, medical ship, I don’t know what you call it, but we were able to come home to Japan. My father wanted to send a telegram from Kyoto to Tottori, but he was told, “If you’re going to go from Kyoto to Tottori, which is not that far, a couple of hours riding but still the train would get there faster than the telegram.” That’s how, already in Japan, the system was not effective at all, by that time. So, we got on the night train and walked through the muddy rice fields, the road, and reached home and that night happened to be the—you know, the Buddhists observe the weekly memorial services after a person passes away—first week memorial services—until the seventh week—which is called the forty-nine day service. It fell on about the fifth week, thirty-five day memorial service. That early evening, they had the Buddhist priest come and conduct the service. My grandparents were farmers, so the priest came, conducted the service and everybody came and left. That evening, my aunty gave birth to her third son, my cousin. So, I know exactly what day that is, which has slipped my mind by the way. So, my grandmother was there at my aunty’s place helping with the childbirth. My grandfather was the only one at home, quite late at night, when five of us arrived at that home. So tired, dirty and my *oji-chan* [grandfather] came out. The only light in the house was just at the entrance, dangling electric light. So, he grabbed it, turned it towards us and said, “Are you guys alive? You’re not a ghost?” (Chuckle) “You guys have legs?” (Laughter) Japanese ghosts float without the legs. He asked seriously, that question. What a silly thing to do I think. He was so glad to see all of us alive.

LG: Was he a Buddhist minister?

TO: No, he's a farmer. My grandfather is just a farmer. My father became a priest out of a farmer's family.

LG: Oh, unusual.

TO: Unusual, yes, unusual. But he had high aspirations. So, he left us at home, and he ran up to my auntie's place and called my grandmother and notified everybody else. They came back and what we wanted to do was just rest and sleep, that night. But my grandparents said, "No way, had nothing to do with it." This is a happy occasion, we gotta celebrate! We gotta pound mochi. They start steaming the rice, from that point. (Laughs) And then, Grandpa and Grandma pound the mochi and said, "Eat, eat, eat!" We were so tired. (Laughs)

MI: Had they prepared the gravestones and things?

TO: Ah, no, no gravestones for us because there was no body for us.

MI: I see.

TO: Yeah.

LG: Did they have [any] *oihai*? [Wooden memorial tablets containing the posthumous Buddhist names given the deceased by a minister, the date of death and also listing in back, their original (given name) and year of birth. These tablets were usually kept with the family *butsudan* or altar.]

TO: I'm sure we had *oihai*. Come to think of it, I haven't seen that *oihai*. Interesting.

LG: Hmm, so, then, what did your father do in Japan and how long did you stay there?

TO: So, from that point on until we came back to Hawaii, we stayed there for five and a half years, from 1945 to 1951. Almost six years.

LG: What was the effect of the war on the Tottori area?

TO: Luckily, Tottori was out in the boondocks. No heavy industry, no military facilities. Only country, rice paddies and nothing else. So, there was no air raids experience in that whole vicinity. So, I experienced [a] relatively peaceful end of the war.

LG: So, they had enough food there to eat?

TO: Well, luckily we were farmers. Rice was not plentiful. We had to eat all kinds of things but there were things to eat. That's the lucky thing. If you go into the mountain, you can pick lots of things. And the ocean is not too far away. There's river, streams, so things are available.

MI: In that period, did you happen to run into any people from Crystal City, in Japan?

TO: No, not at all, not at all. I'm pretty sure my father was able to contact these people and, you see, my father, being a priest, he was asked, especially after the war, to go all over the place to talk about America. People did not know what kind of place America is, so he had to talk to them about this country—[what] the United States is all about. What Hawaii is all about. So, he kept busy. Whenever he's invited, let's say to give a Buddhist sermon at the temple, he had to bring a bag of rice for his portion, to eat. That much, people did not have sufficient rice. But we were farmers, so he was able to take some, "Thanks for inviting me but this is my portion of rice." (Laughter)

MI: The children were English speaking?

TO: No, all Japanese.

MI: I mean, your family.

TO: No, all Japanese.

MI: So, you didn't have a problem going to Japanese school there. They didn't treat you differently?

TO: No, no problem but, I had my cousins, they were the same age...

MI: At Crystal City, you went to the Japanese school?

TO: Yeah, but at Crystal City, I was still four or five years old.

MI: You didn't go to school?

TO: I don't think I went to school. Maybe kindergarten, if I'm not mistaken. But when the war started in Pearl City, the language spoken at home was all Japanese. So, I had a problem when I returned to Hawaii, in '51. I repeated the eighth grade twice at Pearl City, so all my classmates are one year younger than I am—high school classmates.

MI: Why did your family come back to Hawaii?

TO: My father wanted to and the members in Pearl City wanted him to come back. I guess, he was the kind of guy that was well liked, in my estimation. Lucky for that Hawaii connection. [During] the post-war era, people used to send us all kinds of goods: sugar, imitation sugar, saccharin, candy, gum, like that and we were able to exchange that with Japanese money sometimes and [were] able to survive. My father is not a farmer. He left the house, became a minister, so he had no idea what the farming life is all about. So, he visited temples and gave talks. That was his entire life, the job for him.

LG: When your father was traveling around giving these talks, the family stayed with the grandparents?

TO: Yeah.

LG: Your mother and the three kids?

TO: Yeah. My roots, therefore, was there.

LG: Did you folks have to work on a farm at all?

TO: Not work in the sense but as a kid of a farm family, we have our chores to do. One of the chores is, in those days, every farmer had one cow in the house. It became a source of sometimes milk but mostly it's power. For farmers, we need the power.

LG: To pull the plow and...

TO: Plow, and stuff so [the] cow was very important. Cow used to live within the main house, you know. There's the entrance and there's the cow, living right next to the kitchen.

LG: Wow!

MI: Why was that?

TO: Because the cow is so important for the farmer. But my father had to convince my grandfather, "Let's move the cow. At least, make a shack next to the main house." (Laughter) Well, that happened, so it was all right. Every day, about four o'clock or so in the afternoon, boy's job, when you become about third or fourth grader in Japanese school, I mean

elementary school, your job is to take care of your family cow. So, you take the cow out. I'm too young to even tie the rope to the cow's ring so my uncle would tie it for me, and you know the cow has a horn like this, and [I'd] get a rope and hook the right side of the horn, and you stayed back, and you just got the cow moving forward. If you want the cow to turn right, just pull, and the cow would turn this side. If you want [the] cow to turn left, tap like this and the cow would turn left. We learned these things. Around four or four thirty, every kid in the whole neighborhood would bring the cow out and it's our job to take it to a close-by river, let the cow drink. Stomach full of water, fresh water, and then wash the cow. Then let them roam around the riverbank. Eat some fresh grass. Then, take them back. That was our job.

LG: So, every afternoon you would have to do that?

TO: Yeah. I didn't consider that my chore. It was fun, in a way. Sometimes, we would let the cow roam around the riverbank while we were just playing around, wrestling, sumo. In the meantime, the cow would go in somebody else's field and eat (laughter).

MI: Did you teach the cow left and right?

TO: That's how we called.

MI: How did you do that?

TO: Well, it came—I guess we had to teach them, yep. When they are growing up as a calf, I think people teach them.

MI: Interesting.

LG: So, after your family comes back—and they go back to the—he was at the same temple?

TO: Pearl City Hongwanji yeah. Hm, um.

LG: So, what was lifelike--readjustment back? Because you were older...

TO: Yeah.

LG: You had to go to school, and you only spoke Japanese.

TO: It was hard for me. It was. That was the toughest part of my life. Re-learn English. Not re-learn, just learn English.

LG: What was lifelike in elementary school for you, fitting in with the other kids? Here in Hawaii?

TO: Well, when I came back, I was already thirteen years old. I enrolled [in] eighth grade, which was a mistake. I had no idea. I had no English background, and I was deaf and dumb in the class.

MI: So, you were put too far ahead.

TO: Only, I was a lot better than the rest of the kids in math (laughter).

LG: So, this was Waipahu?

TO: No, Pearl City Elementary School.

LG: Pearl City Elementary School went up to...

TO: Eighth grade.

LG: Eighth grade?

TO: [From] ninth grade on, we had to go to Waipahu High.

MI: When you folks moved back to Hawaii, '51 was it?

TO: '51.

MI: Did your family, your father, try to make connections with the Crystal City families?

TO: Not consciously but because of the Japanese community that we lived in, there was occasion [when] people used to get together and talk story about the old days yeah.

MI: But for you, you were too young, so you didn't have friends in Hawaii from Crystal City?

TO: I have no friends.

MI: You didn't go to school [there] that's why.

TO: No. Some of the so-called Crystal City friends, kids who grew up in Crystal City, who stayed until the end of the war, have experienced that. But I didn't stay there too long myself. I did live with them for a few, couple of months. Yeah.

LG: There was some—I don't know if they still meet but there was...

MI: There is a group. They meet every three or four months for lunch.

TO: Crystal City guys?

MI: Yes. You have never been there? I've been there. Oh, you've been there?

TO: Once, they invited me—ah. No, I don't think I'm considered one of them because I just stayed there and just left.

MI: You were too young.

TO: I was too young.

LG: Clifford was part of it?

MI: Clifford Miyamoto, Haleiwa Jodo Mission.

TO: I see, I see.

MI: His father [Reverend Buntetsu Miyamoto], that was his father.

TO: Yeah, Jodo Mission.

MI: We have interviewed a number of them—Carolyn Izumo?

LG: Carolyn Izumo, she passed away maybe a year or two ago, from Soto Mission.

TO: Soto Mission? Yeah, okay.

MI: Did you know her?

TO: No, I don't think—that name doesn't sound familiar either. But Miyamoto, yes, I do.

MI: Carolyn--was Izumo her married name?

LG: Her married name.

TO: There is an Izumi. Her maiden name is Izumi.

LG: So, again, when, like how long did it take you to learn English?

TO: I'm still learning. (Laughter)

LG: I notice that when you write notes, you're writing it in *kanji* and things like that.

TO: (Laughs) I do. Well sometimes *kanji* comes in easier and takes less space, too.

LG: That really got my attention.

TO: Oh, really?

LG: Yeah. [I'm thinking,] "Hey, this guy [is] writing in *kanji*, wow."

MI: When you communicate, in your mind, are you doing a two-step communication?

TO: That's a good question. I always think to myself, how do I do [it]?

MI: You're still Japanese, up here?

TO: No. So many factors come in. One is the subject matter I'm thinking of talking about. Sometimes it's easier to think in English. Sometimes it's easier to think in Japanese. One good measurement is, what do you speak in dreams? Do you speak Japanese or English? Whenever I get up in the morning, and I reflect on some of the things that I had dreamt just a little while ago, I always think, "Was I speaking in Japanese or did I speak in English?" Sometimes I don't remember what language I'm speaking. Then again, once in a while, I still dream about my father. Sometimes my mother. And at times like that, it doesn't matter what I'm speaking, either Japanese—chances are all in Japanese. But other occasions, hmm, I don't know. That's an interesting point you know.

MI: We didn't get to talk about your mother. Can you tell us what her name, her maiden name was?

TO: Oh, her maiden name is Koge.

MI: Her first name, I'm sorry?

TO: Kimiko.

MI: What is her story? How did she end up in Hawaii and marrying your father?

TO: Well, um...

MI: She was a *Nisei*?

TO: Well, she was in Japan.

MI: They married in Japan?

TO: They married in Japan and then they came to Hawaii.

MI: Oh, okay.

TO: Yes, but she was born in Tacoma, Washington.

MI: What's the story?

TO: Of course, when she was little...

MI: So, she was an American citizen, then?

TO: By birth, she was, at first. But when she was four or five years old, her father, my grandfather, decided to go back to Japan. He was a grocery vendor, carrying the things on the back of the truck and he would go here and there selling things.

MI: In Seattle?

TO: In Seattle, Washington. They went back to Japan. From that point on, she grew up as Japanese.

LG: So, she spoke to you, communicated in Japanese?

TO: Oh, yeah.

MI: But she's Seattle, Japan, Hawaii.

TO: Yes, basically.

MI: But she was more Japanese than English?

TO: Oh, yes, definitely, yeah. She grew up in Japan from elementary school years all the way up.

MI: Now, how did all of this affect her? Did you ever talk to her about this whole internment, the hardships, going to the mainland, going to Japan, coming back here? Did she ever talk about her life and how difficult her life was?

TO: Well ... no. That was her life, so she just took it.

MI: Seattle, Japan, Hawaii, Crystal City, back to Japan, back to Hawaii.

TO: Some of the interesting experiences she would share with us—Seattle days—yeah. She grew up among the four siblings, all girls, and then two more born in Japan. All girls [in the] family. She was second from the oldest, second oldest daughter.

MI: She never complained about the hardships in her life?

TO: No. In Japan, she moved several places. Her parents moved several places and finally ended up in Tottori prefecture. In the process of moving, she experienced some, well, harassment from the big city girls, going from the country school to the big city and back to kind of the cities in Tottori prefecture. But, other than that, no. We had experienced the same life so hardly any things that she would complain or anything like that.

LG: How did your schooling go? So, after Pearl City, you went to Waipahu.

TO: Waipahu High School and then, after Waipahu High, I went to UH. After graduation from UH, I went to Kyoto, to study Buddhism.

LG: So, you knew—was it at any point that you decided to go into the ministry?

TO: Mmm.

LG: Or was it just a...

TO: Well, about the beginning of my junior year, I decided to go into ministry.

LG: At the University?

TO: At the University. Yeah, yeah. Basically, I wanted to give ministry, I wanted to experience looking at my father's lifestyle.

LG: Because that is literally a deep—you had more of a choice, whereas a lot of—you know—the sons in Japan, it's like a foregone conclusion that they follow, especially the first son.

TO: Most of the temple families are like that, yeah. But here, especially you know for yourself, you just have to, when we were growing up, back fifty years ago, we had so much choice, in Hawaii. We could go any field we wanted to go, and I had that choice, too. But I chose to give Buddhism a chance. (Chuckles) Let's put it that way.

MI: Did your father suggest that to you?

TO: Funny, they never did. They never did. But I knew that they wanted me to become a minister. In fact, when I told my parents that I'm going to Japan to study, my father was so happy that—he didn't tell me, but my mother told me later on—he asked one of his close friends—minister friend—Reverend Hasegawa. My father hardly goes out for drink, anything like that, but he went out to town and start[ed] celebrating in advance. (Laughs) My father, he's one of those *Issei* ministers, liked to drink and liked to enjoy the company of people. Never went out [to a] bar, [for] a drink. Always enjoyed home [for drinking]. This one occasion, he went out. I don't know whether he enjoyed it or not, but he did.

MI: Let me ask you a little about your father since we didn't get this. We know that he went to Sand Island.

TO: Yes.

MI: Do you know which camps on the mainland he was sent to, from Sand Island, before he got to Crystal City? Santa Fe is one that people mention.

TO: Yeah. He went to somewhere, I forgot where the place was. But he was one of the younger ministers. Some ministers [are] kinda skillful. They can do the carpentry work. If you learn a little bit, you can pick up. My father always used to say, "I had no skill. My only skill was my youth, so I volunteered to do the dirty jobs." (Laughs)

MI: In your [photo] collection, you don't have any photographs of him with a group of ministers in the internment camp?

TO: Internment camp, no, I don't, I don't.

MI: You'll find it interesting—we may be able to use your help because we have many of those photos and we're not able to identify the ministers—if you could take a look at some of those for us.

TO: I don't mind taking a look at those, later.

MI: Now, when the family got to Crystal City, was he there waiting for you?

TO: Yes, he was there.

MI: What did he look like to you folks? How was that reunion? The family had been apart for about how long?

TO: I would say less than two years, a year and a half or so. But I don't have that strong...

MI: You went there by bus to Crystal City?

TO: Yes. I don't ...

MI: You got off the bus and he was waiting for you?

TO: Hmmm. You know, I don't, it's not as strong [an] impact as the day of the Pearl Harbor bombing, when I saw him after he returned from the Honpa service and found us in the cane field. That had a strong impact on me, for some reason. But Crystal City, no, I don't know [remember]. (Laughs)

MI: I was going to ask you what he looked like, you know. Was he—had he lost weight—looked sick? But no memories of that?

TO: No memories of that.

LG: So, you went to Kyoto, and then how many years?

TO: Total of seven years.

LG: Seven years in Kyoto?

TO: 1960 to '67.

LG: And, after that?

TO: Came back. I got married in Japan.

LG: Oh!

TO: Yeah, I met my wife in Japan, and we got married and we had our daughter. We have a daughter and two sons. Our daughter was born in Japan. Our two boys were born here in Hawaii. I left here alone and came back with three. (Laughs)

LG: When you came back, which temple were you with?

TO: I started from Moiliili Hongwanji. Yeah, Moiliili Just down the road. That's when my father, after having served all of his years in Pearl City, he had moved to Moiliili in '64. I came back in 1967. Moiliili was growing so they needed another minister, so I just fit right in there. Then my father retired in '75 and at that time, I was transferred to a new temple on Kauai, Lihue Hongwanji.

LG: How long were you there?

TO: Well, I was at Moiliili eight years and Lihue, eight years. Then I went to Wahiawa Hongwanji, and I wanted to serve eight years there but at the end of seven years, my Bishop yanked me out from there and said, "You serve in Hilo." So, I went to Hilo for ten years as the head minister there. After that, after ten years in Hilo, I came back to the Buddhist Study Center, right up the University Avenue here. I served there for six years, almost seven years. The last four years, I served as the Bishop of Hongwanji and retired in 2011.

LG: So, when you came back, was it Bishop Imamura or was that after his time?

TO: When I came back, the Bishop then was Imamura Sensei.

LG: Oh, okay. So, you were able to know him then?

TO: Yeah, I got to know him well.

LG: Because he, I don't know what the word is for it, but he was, he did a lot of things to change things here.

TO: That's right. He's kind of a man with all kinds of ideas. Having lived in Berkeley for long years, he has new ideas. (Chuckle) Berkeley ideas.

LG: Then he passed away and things kinda faded away.

TO: After the war, when the Japanese on the mainland were returning to the West Coast, he did a lot of things on the West Coast—based around Berkeley, yeah. Helping the Japanese to resettle, you know.

LG: So, right after you at the Betsuin, then Bishop Matsumoto took over?

TO: After me, Bishop Matsumoto took over.

LG: Okay, so that wasn't that long ago then.

TO: Yeah, in 2011, six, seven years ago.

LG: One last thing, when did you learn to play the *shakuhachi* [Japanese bamboo end-blown flute]?

TO: (Laughs) *Shakuhachi* connection here. That was 1964. After we got married, my wife was taking *koto* lessons for a little while and I said...

MI: This was still in Japan?

TO: This was back in Japan. And I said, "Oh, she's playing *koto*, so maybe I should take *shakuhachi* you know." And through her *koto sensei*, I was introduced to this [instrument]. Great *sensei*, Tomii *sensei*. And I started *shakuhachi* with him.

LG: Oh, I see. That's interesting because it's always interesting to learn...

TO: Ah huh.

LG: ...why people take up *shakuhachi* because it's so difficult, you know.

TO: Mmm.

LG: It's kind of a—quite a commitment.

TO: It is. Yes. It's amazing! So many people in the community show interest in *shakuhachi*.

LG: Here? Yeah.

TO: Yeah. Mm, hmm, yeah. You need a lot of patience, though, once you start *shakuhachi*, you know.

LG: So, yeah, I always find that very, very interesting. I didn't realize that the informal *shakuhachi* community in Honolulu is that large. Really that there's that number of people.

TO: Outside of Japan, the largest *shakuhachi* population, according to my *sensei* in Japan, Tomii, is China, right now. China. Chinese want to claim a lot of things as their own. This started from China, or we are the ones that started this thing. They want to claim *shakuhachi* as their creation, too. (Laughs) Well, not necessarily their creation. *Shakuhachi* as it is right now, is created in Japan. But, it has its origin in China. There's tremendous interest in China I understand. Other than Chinese, lots of Caucasian population outside of Japan shows interest in *shakuhachi* playing.

MI: Let me ask you one last thing about your father.

TO: Sure.

MI: Did he ever talk about the internment experience? Did he ever express any anger or bitterness at America for what happened? Or he just never talked about it his whole life?

TO: No, he did not talk bitter about the experience there.

MI: Did he ever talk about it?

TO: Not that much, but in a sense, in a way, he shared with me is that, ah, everything is experience and it becomes part of your life so make good use of your experience. It's not fun, your painful experience.

MI: Sort of a Buddhist approach to life?

TO: You might say that.

LG: It's just a philosophy.

TO: The way of looking at life itself, yeah.

LG: When did he pass away?

TO: He died in '75, ah, '76.

LG: So, that was before the reparations, then?

TO: What? No. 1976. Reparations, what?

MI: Around '90.

LG: Yeah.

MI: 1990. Did you receive the reparations? You should have.

TO: Oh, that...

MI: Twenty thousand dollars.

TO: U.S. Government says—the Letter of Apology. Yes, I received that.

MI: Your mother was still alive also?

TO: Yes, she received it. My sister received it. My brother received one too.

LG: Although he was really little.

MI: How did your mother, and how did you react when you got the letter?

TO: Well, mine was signed by Clinton [President Bill Clinton]. Clinton said, "I'm sorry."
(Laughs). But ahh...

MI: Yours was different?

TO: No, it was the same.

MI: That was interesting.

LG: Was there a reaction, you or your mother—especially your mother because as an adult she went through the experiences as an adult, and...

TO: No, she didn't say anything, one way or the other. No.

LG: She didn't say anything like, "Oh, you know this is good." Or...

TO: Of course, it's twenty thousand, it's big money so she was happy. I was happy, too, receiving that. But other than that, maybe that was coming so we received it, "*Sensei*, thank you."
Yeah, that's about it, really. (Laughs)

LG: Many people have remarked that the letter meant more to them than the money itself.

TO: Mmm.

LG: You know.

TO: The letter...

MI: Do you still have it?

TO: No, with the minister's life, we move, transfer so many places, so many movements and,

along the way, we lost the paper.

LG: Oh.

TO: I really...

LG: You never framed it and put it on the wall? (Laughs)

TO: I should have, you know, yeah. I may have it somewhere, but it will reappear later, after I've left this life.

LG: Do we have any here? Do you know?

MI: I'm sure we have somewhere.

TO: We should have someplace here.

LG: Because that was pretty historical.

TO: It is. It is.