JAPANESE CULTURAL CENTER OF HAWAI'I

Oral History Interview

with

Emiko Watanabe (EW)

Feb 17, 2015 (Part 1 of 2)

Interviewers: Jane Kurahara (JK) and Mel Inamasu (MI)

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.

JK: We wondered if we could start with your telling us, what your name is, and when you were born, and where you were born.

EW: My name is Emiko Watanabe, and I was born and raised in Honolulu. My birthday is October 8, 1930, which makes me *makule* [old], eighty-four, as of today.

JK: I think we should introduce ourselves too, yeah. [Chuckles]

MI: Mel Inamasu. I'm a volunteer at the JCCH Resource Center.

JK: And I'm Jane Kurahara. And I'm a volunteer here at the Resource Center and I'm the same age as you. [Chuckles]

MI: And today is February 17, 2015.

JK: Okay. We were very interested when you said you were the niece of Harry [Minoru] Urata. We knew quite a bit about your uncle. That is immediately why we wanted to talk with you, at least, to start with.

EW: Yes. Well, considering he's my uncle, we understand that he's my mother's second-to-the-last sibling. He came from a family of six brothers and sisters, four of which [were] girls. He and his brother Takeshi are the younger of the six children. I didn't know him that well before he went to Japan to study. I understand from the material that I've read, that he left Hawaii at the age of six, along with a couple of other sisters that my grandma sent home to Japan. One is the very famous Hanayagi Kasho. She's the first of the *natori* [master] who became a famous dancer. She was knighted by the Emperor Hirohito. She's sort of like a living treasure as a dancer. She's also [an] expert in *shamisen* [three-stringed plucked musical instrument] and *nagauta* [songs in time with shamisen]. Of which, when she came back, at age of nineteen, after studying in Japan, my auntie came back at the age of twenty when she officially became *natori,* what they called titled dancer of the Hanayagi School. At that time, I was only three years old, and when she

docked at the Honolulu Harbor and the big entourage welcomed her home, I was there, very young, to pay tribute to her, coming back.

JK: What was her name?

EW: Alice Urata. Officially, her title is Hanayagi Kasho. And interesting about that is, all these years, she had a big following. She had the top dancing academy here for the longest time. Then the war came. We had to all…disband everything. And so, when I studied with her, I was only three. And odd as it may seem, my mother was writing to her in Japan and saying, "I have a young daughter now, Emiko," and cued her into just briefly that she's an artist, Emiko, along with other brothers, but they didn't register because she was looking for an heir to extend to her Hanayagi School. She promised her master Hanayagi, that though she was only twenty when she got her title, big title…well she was so fine and by the way, when she first left to go there, they all made fun of her. They say, the students of the school say, "Look at this girl. She's from Hawaii, and she's a low class. What's she trying to do? Study in this school and compete with us!" In her mind, she says, "I'll teach you. I'll show you." She didn't say a word and she became the top of the school. So then, at age twenty, when she came back, she was looking for her heir. Not so much to be a teacher but looking for her, after…her. The crowd at Honolulu Harbor, with the Japanese consulate, and the mayor, the governor…all there to welcome her home. My mother was the first of my grandma's children. First came all of the dignitaries, then they honored the mother, my mother, the oldest daughter, right down the row. And when it came to my mother, she said, "Oh!" She said, "You remember? I wrote to you to say that I have a young daughter, Emiko." She says, "Yes." She was so enthused. And she said, "Here she is!" I was bedecked with all the garments. Tiny. Then, you know what she did? Right away? She had gobs of leis in her hand that people gave her. She just did away with the lei, and she went like this. She wanted the whole crowd to make room, and she got me, she says, "You look at auntie and do everything that I do. I give you three chances only." Three chances only. So, I looked at her and she said, "You do whatever auntie do." So here I was. I looked at her and I imitated her. First one. She was so pleased. She couldn't believe it. She thought she was going to have to look for an heir, years and years after, but here it was. Right away and it was in the family, yeah? She was so thrilled. Then she said, "The next one." I imitated her, the second one. She was thrilled again. The third one. You know what, she came to me and with a look in her eye, she said, "We start tomorrow." And I can see that as clear as today, as how I saw her that day. She commanded me. From the next day on, I was not a little child anymore. Had to go to school every day. Culture school. You know we went to English school, then we go to Japanese school, *kauma gakuen*. Then, after that, everybody else goes home. I go to my dancing school, which was not too far, in Palama. We lived in the lower Alewa Heights. So, I went diligently to dancing lessons every day.

JK: When did you start this schedule? When you were three?

EW: Three years old. And I studied with the intention to be like her. First, a dancer. But in the Japanese mode of training, you are not just a dancer. You have to know the *shamisen* and the *nagauta* that goes along with it. You have to be all-rounded. So, about the age of

six or seven, I was still young, and the *shamisen* neck is so long. I wasn't able to reach it. But she settled it. She had a miniature *shamisen* made. She ordered one. And here I was, learning to play the *shamisen* at a young age. After that, came the *nagauta*. You know the Japanese song that depicts the Japanese *fuyo*
[folk] dance? So, I was studying that along with it. But the Japanese school of teaching, the dancing school, they had a plaque, a *fuda*, like so. If you come first, you put your name and ticket for your lesson on the *fuda*. And you're number one to have your lessons. Second one, after that's the second. No matter how early I came, she would put me at the very end. That means, if she had fifteen students, I would be the last one, fifteenth. But I put mine first! The reason for it was, others would have one lesson and go home. I would have fifteen lessons. I had to sit, *ohisa*, all that while, and look at all their lessons. So, it imprints in my mind, and everything, the way she teaches, unlike any other teacher. They mold your body. She teaches. She holds your whole body to form you, to give you the correct posture, like her spirit goes into you. Every…here, there. I was very fortunate, and of course, it was very rigorous. All the other students couldn't stand [it]. She was so strict that they would end up crying after their classes. They all ended up in the bathroom. They all collected in there, crying. I open the door and say, "Why are you here?" "Oh, *sensei* [teacher] is too rough." No. She was very particular, to give you more than ordinary. Very serious. But they couldn't take it. And I…every time she scolded me, I really welcomed the criticism. That's why, 'til today, all the dances I learned, the classical dances—the female, the comedian, and the man—I can do all, with perfection. And it never left my mind from the time I'm three until now. Every movement, I know the dances, imprinted in me so well, that there is no chance that I could forget it. That was such tremendous training for all time. So, when they used to have any kind of performance with the Japanese community, like what-you-call it? Contests? I used to enter the contest, and win them all, always *itosho* ((?)) And I'm so tiny, and I come home with a trophy this big, I can hardly carry it, but I used to win them all.

MI: Do you think you have a gift for this? Or do you think you learned it through hard work?

EW: It must have been in a certain sense, I think, inherited, the talent. My family, all musicians, all artists. Yeah? No different. And uncle [Harry Minoru Urata], he died when he was ninety-one. His youngest brother just died six months ago. He's a dentist. He died at ninety-four. And from that age, to me, is ninety-four—I'm eighty-four—only ten years difference. The youngest uncle to the third generation. They're second generation. Uncle Minoru is second generation but because he was training…went to Japan to go [to] school, I understand he's a *kibei* [Japanese Americans educated in Japan]. *Nikkei* or *Kibei.* But we're only a few years apart in two generations. Now we are on our sixth generation. Because third generation, if my oldest brother lived, he would be eighty-seven. For a *Sansei* [third generation] unheard of. Most *sansei*, the earliest are about seventy, more or less. But we're in our eighties. My second brother made eighty-six, so the other one eighty-eight. Hisede, eighty-six. He's living. I'm eighty-four and we're *sansei*. So, we're on our sixth generation. You know?

JK: So, you're only ten years apart from Harry…Minoru. Did you have much contact with your uncle?

EW: After he came back from Japan. You see, his mother lived…you know, where Tamashiro Market is? Just about one block *mauka* [mountain side] of Palama Street. In those days, it was a big house. Today, you go there, you can hardly recognize it. It's a junky junk. In those days, it was a profoundly beautiful gray house. That's where my grandma lived. She, my auntie, was an artist, a dancer, and lived there. When uncle came home, he lived there too. So, I was there for my lessons every day, believe me, seven days a week. Saturday, we had to go to Japanese school. Females go to Japanese school learning *shamisen*. Not *shamisen*, sewing, ikebana [flower arranging]. The men go there to learn judo. On Saturdays, yeah? After that, they went home. I have to go to my dancing class, right near the corner. [Chuckles] And I studied, and I was so crazy about the music, the dancing. I really appreciated my auntie. My uncle, when he came home from Japan, he hardly spoke much English, so he had to study. He ended up in Mid-Pacific [Institute, also known as Mid-Pac]. Prior to that, he studied somewhere else. Oh, Iolani. He didn't know English. He was to live here, and didn't even know the language. I guess it was a couple of months before he graduated from Mid-Pac.

The war started and they came to get him in class. And I told you, he said, that particular morning when they came, the studies was on American Democracy. I really loved him because he was a very unusual person, very, very calm, collected. But you can see in his eyes, he was very focused. And my auntie, also an artist, she was that way. Grandma got married in Japan, from Kumamoto. She came to Hawaii to work as a contract worker in the fields. That's where he got the "Holehole Bushi" [plantation song].

MI: She sang those same songs?

EW: No, no, no. What happened is that his mother, father came from Japan, from Kumamoto and…as contract laborers. So they were looking for a better life, because they came from the poorer southern part of Kumamoto. But it didn't happen so easily, it was very rough. So, I think they signed a contract for four years to be working. Then they can forsake their contract. In that time, I think they only made a day's work, twenty-five cents a day; that's what my grandfather was earning. And her [grandmother] might be even less, because she's a woman. A very hard life and everything. What happened, after his contract got finished, from that twenty-five cents a day, somehow, he was able to scrounge some money, and he bought a property in Kailua. Why Kailua? He wanted to raise watermelons to make a business. Those days, we had no tunnel. You go and drive what-he-had, Model T? Because I remember, behind that thing, jumping in the car. So, he was going to work to and fro, at which time he had two other workers he brought [in] to work in his watermelon farm.

One day, the car somehow—I thought it was [a] horse—had lost control, but no, it was that Model T car, right into the Nuuanu Pali. So, if you look in the history of Hawaii, the first automobile accident was my uncle [correction: grandfather]. But he didn't hit no car! It just went over the cliff. One man lived and he [grandfather] and another died.

JK: This was a different uncle. Not Minoru.

EW: This was Uncle Minoru's father. So here, my grandmother, yeah? No education, no money, no nothing, was left with six children. This dentist, the last of the six siblings, was just born. She was left with six children to raise without anything. Zero, zero. So, she's a high spirited, very short, kinda chubby, but a hard, hard, hard worker. So she said to herself, "I have to take care of all six children. No husband. Nobody will marry me. So, I will fend it all on my own." And then she said to herself, "I have to do something that nobody can do." Can you imagine a person that has no education, no nothing? That's what she willed herself. I have to do something that nobody can do. Somehow, when she was in Japan, she learned how to clean the *fugu*, the poison *fugu* fish. That is a delicacy. You have to be very wealthy to be able to have *fugu*. So, right there, where she lived was in the ghetto, where Nihon, the movie theater, was called the ghetto, Aala area. Tin Can Alley it was called. Then Nihon Gekijo, much later on, the new Toyo Theater, which was demolished during the war. She had a grey house, ugly, ugly house. I can remember it because [it was] skinny and long. Was just right opposite the Mun Lun Gakko, the Chinese elementary school. Hers was opposite. Today it's Borthwick Mortuary. And Hosoi is further down. All in that area, her children grew up and she had this one house, and she said, "I have no money to invest or anything. I will make my fugu restaurant, right in my house. Half would be to raise my children, half would be the restaurant." The restaurant consisted of only three cafe tables, this round, three chairs. Her older daughters were the waitresses. She was the one that cleaned the fugu and she had a tub in the kitchen. She pulled off the skin and she put in the…next, and they're running around. No matter, yeah! They don't die! They don't have the jacket of the skin and everything, but they don't die. Of course, during those days, nobody really had a business like that, but she had, so only the very wealthy [customers]. She was very, very intelligent, and strong and high willed. She opened…and she became one of the richest women in Hawaii. From that *fugu* shop. You don't need many customers because it's so expensive.

MI: So, she kept it there in the house?

EW: Yeah. In the same house. Only half this side is where she served, in the small little…very ingenious. She's in the kitchen and doing it. And because it's…not like a Japanese restaurant, you only have the *fugu* with the light broth, like watery…clear watery broth and the only thing is you put a little tofu, a few pieces of the fugu, the clear broth, and *negi* [onion], that's it. I don't know whether she was serving *tsukemono*, with rice. That's it. No other thing on the menu. Only fugu.

She became so wealthy. I can still remember the man who used to come and deliver the tofu. Didn't need any ingredients, only long onion and tofu and rice. That man who came to deliver on his bicycle, the tofu, in this five-gallon thing on his bike.

She loaned so much money to the people, her friends, because she was fortunate to be able to be very successful with that business. She helped many, many people to start businesses. She was very, very successful and enterprising and had a golden heart to give. That's where her children all got that. Strong-willed and to be able to share, take care of the community, everything that needed to be done, willingly.

JK: Did she send some of the children to Japan for education?

EW: She sent three: my Uncle Minoru, my Auntie Shizuko, the one who became the dancer, and another aunt, Grace, Tsuruko. Tsuruko studied fashion culture, you know how to dress and do all the hairdo, from scratch. Your own hair, she would do, and how to dress the ladies in beautiful kimono, the proper way, very fancy, very expensive. She learned, just like fashion school. All three were there.

JK: Do you know what Minoru was sent for?

EW: She said, to Uncle Minoru, "I will send you away to school, but I don't want you to…nothing to do with music." And his love was for music! My grandmother said, "All our background, our relatives are all musicians in Japan. So, I don't want you to...do something else, anything, anything. Not music. So he was so distraught by what his mother said, and he had to follow. So, what is closest to music is philosophy. And that's where he went into. That's the reason why he became a philosopher. And that's why he could tie up everything, to be able to lead in the realm of community, historically, with the Japanese. He was so capable, because he had that background. And luckily he did, because he filled a spot that nobody else at that time was able to fill. So, he became an ethnomusicologist. He became also…even when he was in school, Keijo University or so, and he wasn't able to partake in studying music, they told me, every time they turned around he had, between classes, he would round up all the boys from the university, and he would conduct chorus, true to form, every chance he had he would do that. So, his true love was that. But he had to study philosophy. That's why he was very, very multi-faceted. Very, very fond. His very good friend is [Shigeo] Yoshinaga, the Kendo master here [Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii]. Remember he just died; he's the one that does the *dojo* [a hall or place in which martial arts are practiced]. He's the expert Master of Kendo, instructor. They were like buddies. When Mr. Yoshinaga somehow came to…my uncle said, "I go back to Honolulu, Hawaii and you come later, and I will help you to establish in Hawaii. Don't just stay in Japan. Come here." They stayed at my auntie's home, right there on Palama Street, near Lanakila School. During the war, they turned it into an Army camp, you remember? The Lanakila playground and across, all became an Army camp. And his youngest sister lived there in that area of Palama. When the war came, she begged her husband, "Please, you're such a master mechanic, so terrific, but you don't earn anything to support the family." He does all the work, just like a doctor of surgery, the way he does the car. That area, the people are so poor, they cannot pay him. But they need their car to be worked on; they gotta go to work, so he used to do it for them. And they bring it next time, and they don't pay, so she doesn't have any income to support. But her husband is such a hard worker, you go past there one o'clock in the morning, the light is on and he's still in the garage. So, that auntie stayed, but only visited the auntie in Korea. One of my grandma's sisters was in Korea so she went and lived there a little while. My mother stayed here, the older daughter, and she was highly talented, but she didn't have the means to pursue that for a profession. That's the reason why she was so intent, that she gave me the chance to do that.

JK: Your son said your mother was born here?

EW: My mother was *Nisei*; she was born here. My father was born in Lahaina, Maui. So, when the war came, I couldn't pursue my Japanese dancing, you see, because the minute she found me at the harbor, she wrote to her master. She said, "You think that you produced your top student," which was her, at age twenty. "I promise you, the one I will produce will be at age twelve." That was supposed to be me. But I was eleven and a half and we were on schedule. She was teaching me everything; I was being groomed. At the age of twelve, I would go to Japan, I would conquer her title from her, because I'm her. But half a year before that day came, Pearl Harbor. And everything stopped. Everything stopped. Then she was, like my uncle, thought to be a traitor, because she was so young, she was so high up there.

JK: Interned, too?

EW: No, she wasn't interned, but she was overlooked every day. Like I was overlooked every day, because I was her precious protégé. The FBI, she cannot operate, she cannot even, she used to, every day, she was in *yukata, obi* [Japanese summer kimono and sash]. From that day on, they were not allowed to wear clothes, slippers, or talk. So, here I was, in the middle of a very important thing for my auntie and for myself, eleven and a half, the war came. Then she told my mother, she directed my mother, don't worry about Emiko. We were on that plan to make her a terrific, top-notch dancer. But, this is life. This is the circumstance we are in and we're not partaking in Japanese dance, hula, ballet or anything. We cannot do that. So just forget about it but let her study everything that she wants because whatever she studies, she's going to be on top of everything. She knew my makeup; she knew my ability. So, my mother said, "OK, Emiko, what do you want to study?" OK. [I] studied the violin, studied ballet, studied Hawaiian singing with the top, John Almeida, he's the master, the top hula, *kumu* [teacher] *hula*, the Beamer family, the mother Beamer. My mother was so particular [as to] who was the teacher, I would be studying everything, everything. If you have a master teacher, the student will be top. She would audition the teacher, not the teacher audition the pupil. So therefore, I was very fortunate. I was able to now, I said, "Okay, I cannot do the Japanese dancing, but I know that I have something in here that nobody has." What? I studied theater, Japanese theater. Japanese Kabuki is the finest theatrical technique. So, I said, "Yes, I want to become an opera singer." At that time, there's no Oriental opera person. Let alone, I said, I see that the European artists, they have the physical strength, they're tall, they're big. I'm only five feet five, five feet one at that time, only a hundred and twenty pounds or so, cannot even compete. If you have a small voice, you're nothing. You're dime a dozen. You have to be like them, the heavyweight. Like the boxers. If you're a heavyweight, you are worth a lot. You're valuable. Medium weight, flyweight, nothing. Not worth it. Dime a dozen. I have the physical of an Oriental, very tiny. In the opera, I should be a lightweight soprano. I don't want that. I want to be the heavyweight. But how can…my physical asset is so nil. I said, I will challenge. What can I challenge with, I said, I have an incredible stage background from Oriental dancing. I will be going into European art, which is opera, Caucasian .... It's their culture, opera. How will I defend myself? I have superior stage background, which they don't. They go on stage, they look like a hippopotamus, so big, clumsy. But, I have the finesse of Japanese dancing and

background. So, I'm way ahead. So, that is the European culture, opera, Western music, but I have the Oriental background. Now I have the Polynesian background because I studied with the top. Now I have the Oriental, the Polynesian, now I will conquer the European. Which I did. And why? Because we had different kinds of training, different outlook. European is physical, Oriental is mental. We do everything mental. When I studied my Japanese dancing, we don't do athletic [physically], we did athletic in the mind. Before our performance, we go in the corner, we sit down and we meditate. Other kinds, push the body. We don't, we push our mind. So, when we get to our performance, it's already perfected before we do it. With them, they're on the stage and they're wrangling. So, it's very, very…more effective. Different interpretations of doing the same thing. You get more mileage. Now, my Uncle Minoru, when he came back, he was so solely into music, he liked it so much, but he wasn't able to do it, so he had to learn Japanese. Of which, I was very young and I was studying Hawaiian singing, Hawaiian dancing. So, when he did his *ongakudan*, I mean, his orchestra, then he got his brother to play the steel guitar, not only performing Japanese music but Hawaiian music. The Hawaiian music, he let me do the dancing and the singing, and his brother played the guitar.

JK: This was a band?

EW: Yeah. Japanese orchestra, they had *nihon…nippon ongaku* [Japanese music]. Then they had *shinko ongaku*. [religious music]. Quite a few were competing, and they were playing music all over Honolulu. So, he used to win, and I was young, much younger and I was winning all the dancing contests. He was winning all the singing contests. Then, people started to point fingers, to say, "How come? It's a…a what-cha-ma-call, it isn't fair that the family is winning. It's rigged up that they would win." But it's not so, it's just [that] the talent was far better. It happened to be in the family. He was my uncle, Urata but I was Suzuki. One was dancing, the other one was singing. So, he was extremely talented. And I know that he was…

JK: Was this before the war?

EW: Yes.

JK: When did he start his studio? Music studio?

EW: Studio? That he started after he came back from the internment. He's been teaching for more than fifty years. He said, "I'm going to teach until fifty years." But [when it] came fifty years, he didn't want to give it up. He was going to fifty-three. Fifty-three years. I said, "Hey, I thought you were going to stop!" "No, no, no. I like to pursue." Because he felt committed to the Japanese community. To feed them culture, Japanese culture. When I used to go to Palama, when I would go for my lessons and he would be there, he was so funny. Uncle was very like I'm the younger sister and he's the brother. And he was a terrific kendo artist. But [when] his friend, Mr. Yoshinaga, who's the master kendo, died, somebody else took over. Because they were like brothers, [they] lived in my auntie's rooming house. Auntie Doris, not my Auntie Alice, who is the dancer.

Auntie Doris was the one who [had] the lunch wagon. She became so prosperous with her lunch wagon. I told you, her husband could not make a living because he said, I feel so bad, I don't have money to put food on the table. So, she had to go into his pocket to take whatever coins he had, to make stew, soup or something to feed. She told her husband, make me a small lunch wagon and I'll put it in front of our yard. That lunch wagon became a gold mine. It used to come in the paper. The stew was so *ono*, that they'd come. One boy came and took the whole pot and stole it. And, thirty years after, the boy came to my auntie when she was already old, and confessed to her. I was the one who took it. [laughter]. At last, I know the person who took it. He said, was so-o ono, I couldn't refrain from taking. And so [she said] I didn't need the stew, I needed the pot. The big pot that she made the stew in.

MI: Where was the lunch wagon?

EW: Right in front of the house, School Street and Lanakila. And here's Lanakila Park, which became an Army camp during the war. Lots of soldiers, living there. They have to eat the mess hall food, they're tired [of it]. Right across the street was my auntie's house, old Palama street, not new Palama. Tiny lunch wagon, very small. But she opened, she made a kitchen in her house, and she cooked in her extra kitchen. She brought everything here. But those days in the wartime, [it was] hard to get the special noodles you want and all that. She would just improvise. She can make her own shave ice, and she made her own syrup and so the shave ice cup would be this way. So she'd use the same shave ice cup this way. She could use a smaller shave ice cup. She would make her noodles, in balls, like a *musubi*, put one of those balls of noodles. She got her *dashi*, put in there. She gets her luncheon meat and green onions. And here she only had [a] fifteen cents charge for her saimin. If you bought the barbecue, she has it going all day long, the smell, everybody [was] coming. So easy, all she does is dip it in the sauce and she puts on the thing, and she dips it again, glaze it. Only five cents. Her saimin was fifteen cents and her stick thing is only five cents. Everybody came to her stand. The best hamburger which she made was very reasonable, very, very cheap and delicious. People from the other side of the island [would] come. She made a gold mine. And she made a house, accidentally. Mr. Watanabe, four sons and one daughter, his oldest son is the one I married. And he was the top contractor in Hawaii, Watanabe contractor. He, along with my uncle, Harry, did you know that we used to go to Aala Park? Across there was a railroad. That's where, once a week, the military would bring the truck there and allow my grandmother - all the [internees] can bring only two in the family each Sunday. So that's when I was able to go, to visit Uncle Minoru, [at] Honouliuli.

JK: Tell us about those visits.

EW: When you went there, they dropped you off the big Army truck. It's all like that, rolled up, you cannot see. That's how they came to get you [at Aala Park]. Only two in the family each Sunday. If only two, [it was] my grandmother with me or my grandmother with my mother. So, when you get off at Honouliuli, oh, that was a sight to be seen. I tell you, like a chicken coop, like a dog kennel. Like a kennel with all the wire. Yeah. You walk down and I walk out, oh, my uncle there, behind that fence. Who's right on the

side of him? It's Mr. Watanabe, my father-in-law. Because he was…it was very interesting. He came from a relatively wealthy Japanese family, the father sent him to America [from Japan]. He's *Issei*.

MI: What was his name?

EW: Watanabe. Jenichi Watanabe. John Watanabe. And he…the Japanese were the bulk of the craftsmen with the carpentry because they were good with the hand, yeah? He was sent by his family to go to the Mainland [U.S.] to study. But when he came to Honolulu, he liked it here. He said, "I'm not going to go any further." He stayed here, but now he had to earn his living. He had no…

MI: Instead of going back to Japan?

EW: Yeah, yeah. And so, he had to make a living, so you know what? There used to be Honolulu Harbor, the sampan, the fishing, Fisherman's Wharf? He used to be good with his hands, so he started to do carpentry work for the sampan. He became so good that he elevated himself to work as a carpenter. Later he became the President of the Contractors Association. That's the reason why, when the war came, they hauled him in. He went to Honouliuli. Same thing. That's why…but that was way before I got married to his son. The Watanabes lived about four or five blocks from where we lived in Alewa Heights so they're in our association up there, neighbor, yeah? Considered a neighbor. So, they liked my dancing ability. They used to come to all my performances wherever I performed. They used to religiously come. Those days, they just come. You have no tickets that you sell but you just come, and you bring an envelope, an empty envelope, I mean a plain envelope, and you put one dollar in it. Or, you know, a bigger gift would be, might be a hundred pound bag of rice. And that was only two dollars.

JK: Really?

EW: Yeah! Incredible. So, when I would perform, our biggest auditorium was McKinley, for the longest until we had the Blaisdell [Arena]. In the corridor, all that space, might be nineteen people performing, but because I was the top, I would get all the baskets of flowers from all the admirers. They either bring you an envelope with one dollar, that's to help you pay for your Japanese costumes that you have to study with, and buy when you have to perform. You need very fine, expensive...all the things you need to go along with your dancing and wearing costumes for the dance, very elaborate. Many of them had gold thread. To make the style, the design. Your audience, comprised of…anybody, if they believed in you, they liked to see you dance, they would come. You don't have to announce.

MI: So, they pay you directly? How about the instructors, the teachers? Did they get paid also?

EW: No! Only the ones who are performing, the friends would come, and the friends would bring you the envelope. There was no exchange of money like selling tickets, "please

come to see me" or nothing. Only the performances are announced. If you know who's performing, you just drop by. Sometimes they bring you beautiful umbrellas which they hang from the ceiling. It used to be like that. Whenever I would perform at a big performance and I would win trophies or I would have critics from the paper, they would come, my *kocho sensei* [Principal] from Palama Gakuin would hear about it and I would ... oh, so many flowers, I can't bring it home. I just brought back two, one for the Japanese school and one for the *haole* [English language] school, Lanakila. So Kocho sensei from Palama Gakuin, before you go into the class you have an outdoor assembly, and they play the music and you march in your room. Before that, he would announce the day's announcements. When I would dance, he would always announce it to the students. You know what he used to say; he would say that I was born from my mother's stomach, already an artist. You know, Hasegawa Kazuo, famous actor? When I was very young and I performed, he happened to be there. He said to me, to my auntie and I, I was very young. He's not a tall person, but when you're young, he seemed so tall. He put his hand on my head like this, like he christened me, and he said to my auntie, *"Hara kara umareta tensai*." You know what is that? "Born from the stomach, already an artist." I never took a lesson, wasn't my doing. That's how he was quoted, and my auntie said, "Now don't forget [what] Hasegawa Kazuo said, *'Hara kara umareta tensai*.'" That's why I know. So honored. So, I feel that I need to give back. So that's why I'm invaded, like a circumstance. War. It really shattered my dream to become a Japanese dancer, invaded into the operatic field. That's where I was able to...During that time the prejudice was so fierce on the mainland. Not because I'm Japanese, they cannot tell you are Japanese or you're Chinese or Korean. They cannot tell. Only they can tell that you're not white, you don't have Caucasian skin. The black is black, we are yellow. They are white. You don't fall into the white category, you're nobody. So, I wasn't even able to eat in a restaurant. I wasn't even able to stay in the hotel. I wasn't able to stay. Everything was taboo, even the Chinese restaurants. I got so tired of eating sandwiches, morning, noon and night. Outside, no restaurant would serve me. Yes. So, one day I said, "Oh there's a Chinese restaurant, I'm going to go there at lunch time because I'm a student. But if I go there, I can eat rice, once and for all." All the other days, morning, noon and night, I have to go into the basement to buy a loaf of bread, sandwich meat, and milk. That's all I had. A girl from Japan, Hisako Ito, from Sendai, a girl Chong Song from Seoul Korea, one girl Marian Lett from New Mexico—she's a very talented Mexican girl—all four of us in that school. They bunched us together, in one room only. And all the others, they can eat in the restaurant, we had no cafeteria, so they can go to—Chicago is the city of restaurants—all kinds of restaurants. You can go in there and sit until blue moon, nobody's going to wait on you.

JK: Was that before the war?

EW: After the war. I left here in 1949, graduated in 1948 from Farrington [High School]. My teacher here for classical singing said that I have to go to Chicago, because the master is there. My father said, "Why Chicago? Why not New York?" She said, "I'm sorry, the master is in Chicago." All what he [father] knew at that time was gangster city…

MI: What kind of master?

EW: Opera. Classical singing. So, I had to be shipped there. So even the Chinese restaurant I thought I can have a bowl of rice, [so] I go early 11 o'clock. I'm the first one to sit. They let you sit. But they won't come to wait on you. All the people in the office downtown would call it "Loop." Can have their lunch, they come later, they have their lunch, they go back to work at one o'clock. I'm still sitting there.

MI: You just accepted that [treatment]?

EW: Yes. 'Cause I knew, you can't do anything about it. You have to work along with it. This is society. This is not the artists. This is society. They're not ready, especially in the Midwest, not after the war, throughout the whole, the west coast. East easy...east coast is easy, because it's a port town. All the people coming from abroad, all the people coming from the west to east coast, so they're accustomed, more or less. Midwest, they won't accept it. So, when you come across problems like that you can't help it. You have to face it. So, I said, I had to be good. I have to be ten times better than all my others, so I became ten times better. But even then, you go to an audition, where you want to sing, let them hear you, so they can give you your job or contest or whatever. Everybody goes, they listen. When I go, they send you home. Only time, you have to call on the telephone, you say, "Emiko Suzuki," they think it's Emilio Sousouski, Russian or Polish. "Come." They look at you. "What are you here for?" They don't say, "Go home." "We're busy; we cannot spare the time." Nice excuse. This kinds of things people don't know. But, you know, there comes a time when you can, if you persevere, you lay yourself down on the line, you pioneer, then you make a little crack, an opening for the future generations. That's what I was able to do. You have to lay yourself down to accept that.

MI: How do you do it?

EW: Selfless. You don't think about yourself. You're only thinking about only one site, like a horse with this black thing, you cannot see anything. You can see but you…you close it, just go straight. All my life I was that way. As a youngster, I have playmates and all that. They cannot see eye to eye.

MI: Any people you remember who helped you?

EW: In my time, not. Even in high school, you're a lone wolf. If you're not able to be aware of it, you'll never make it. No matter what. Whatever trouble that befalls, you must be able to climb above.

JK: The change came within you?

EW: My grandmother's spirit. You know what? 'Cause she had nothing, no money, no education, poor as hell. Lost her husband. She got to take over everything by herself. So she had to think differently. Like she said, "I have to do something nobody is doing." Then, when she talked to us, she looked…all the education is wonderful. She said,

"Instead of learning, just do it." That's what she had to do. Jump in and just ride it. [Chuckles]

JK: So, jump in and you just did it? What did you do?

EW: All my life, what I want to do, the way I want to do, I did it. Not like anybody else. You're alone by yourself.

JK: They didn't want to give you a chance?

EW: Yes, no matter what, you make the chance. Someday, if you wait long enough and you persevere long enough, you see the opportunity. In life, you have to make it.

JK: So, you found an opportunity?

EW: I was able to wait it out. You see, one very good example is, in Chicago at the Soldier Field, there is something like twenty-three thousand people sitting at that field; it's like a stadium. Once a year, in Chicago, they call it the Chicago Land Music Festival. At which time they have only solo singers. They compete, so many different divisions. The soprano division, maybe five different departments. Tenor, five different departments. Bass baritone, five different. Alto, five different departments. So many different categories. I'm in the heavyweight. The heavyweight is the most difficult. I'm tiny, my competitors all five-eight, six foot, three hundred fifty pounds. I'm one hundred eighty at the most. I eat, eat, eat too many .... I cannot go this way, I can only go. ... But you need the weight. No such thing as you're going to be a heavyweight boxer when you're one hundred and fifty pounds. You cannot. But I was able to challenge because I had the mental power to take over the rest that I didn't physically have. But, difficult. OK, everything else I cannot enter, knowing that. Cannot. So, you enter with the hopes that, that's OK, I'm immune already, I'm going to do it anyway. This is part of my life, I have to partake. Go and enter. How many, a thousand five hundred contestants from all over the United States, come. That one contest. so I signed up. You go over there. Now this is the only time I ever experienced that your name doesn't matter. You're nothing but a number. Fair chance, yeah. Number. So, your number comes, you go out and sing, they don't see you, they put a curtain. Yes. So, I go and sing; they don't know that I'm Japanese, I'm yellow color, black color or anything. So, they cannot be discriminated against. That's the only time I had no discrimination. And what? I won the whole contest.

MI: What year was this?

EW: 1958. So that proved to you, yeah, if it wasn't for this [competition] I cannot even sing a note. The other things [competitions], I cannot even sing a note. They don't hear one note. Everybody else can sing badly, they hear the whole song.

MI: After you finished, did they raise the curtain?

EW: No. [laughter]. They didn't know. After they announced the winner, then I came out.

MI: Was there a reaction in the audience?

EW: They're shocked. [laughter]. They're shocked. No, but this is the same thing with the churches. I became the top church singer in the whole Midwest. Chicago is the city of churches and city of restaurants. If you go to Chicago, every big city block [they] have a church. Everywhere a church. Everywhere, good restaurants. So, I want to sing in the church, OK, no different than at a restaurant or anything. They won't allow you. I go to audition, I call them up and they tell me to come. I go. Then, they see me, shocked. The director's shocked. I'm not supposed to be there. I caused them a lot of problems. But he cannot hear me because if he does let me sing, the whole church would mow him down. They have to be so in wanting you, their soloist. Then if they cannot, they give up their position. They give up their job to have me under them. Unless they're willing to do that, I cannot. So, every time, musicians and artists, they have a different kind of heart, different than ordinary, so they will stake their life and their job for you. And that made it. Even in the largest one that I had, in Chicago, the largest, biggest Protestant church, Fourth Presbyterian Church, that's the largest of all Methodists, Baptists, all the Protestant churches, that's the top. I was able to be the top, and not only Protestant, a Jewish Synagogue, I was a top ..... and. that's also .... Every position that I took, I had a hard time. You'd think the church is above all, the one place that you don't have the discrimination. It's the worst discrimination. Why? That's the one place that it should not be allowed. Even in the Jewish Synagogue, they hired me, they contracted me, they want ... but they don't want. Even they hire me, I cannot sing for the congregation. I go up around the balcony. I go to the top choir loft from the back door. Nobody knows that what they're hearing is coming out of the mouth of an Oriental. They think it's... they use a curtain. So, I say, it's a revelation, but you have to be willing to deal with it. Otherwise, there's no progress. Never going to make progress.

MI: Did your life change after the contest at Soldier Field?

EW: No, what do you mean change? How? Same thing. They didn't know that I got it. Until the time they gotta give the award.

MI: You won the contest…it didn't open doors for you?

EW: All that it did is settled in my mind, I was able to challenge, and I won. Your own satisfaction. To begin with, you're not doing it to please you, you're doing it to be able to be in the professional field that you feel that you should be in. You attain it. That's all that matters as an artist. But, like my Uncle Minoru, he is truly a beautiful person and willing to do everything. When he was doing all of this, he didn't have, really, financial resources. But for forty years he risked going to do this and do that for people. That was his reward. If he was able to do something, for the good of the congregation of mankind.

JK: I think I understand him better now, some of the things like from Honouliuli, he got sent to Tule Lake and all he says is I was a naughty boy but now I understand, he was strong willed.

EW: He had terrific patience. So disciplined. So highly disciplined. And my auntie, they all had self discipline, self esteem, to conquer whatever they needed to attain the level that they would like to.

[Discussion of singing and artifacts]

MI: I was going to ask you to sing for us. [laughter]

EW: I am so rusty, I'm so embarrassed, I don't sing. I sang only, after I came back, I only sang for my auntie's eighty-eighth birthday because I lived with her for ten years. This is the one who had the lunch wagon. And Lingle, Linda Lingle when she first became Governor. The reason why I did it for her is because I honored her. She was the first woman Governor of Hawaii. Another thing is that she's Jewish. And in Chicago, in all the United States, in known Temple Sharon, I was the top singer, top cantor, and so I wanted to honor her. She was shocked, she was literally shocked, she couldn't believe me. She said, how? I said, Temple Sharon, is where my post was. She said, "Temple Sharon?" I said "Yes." " Chicago, on the lake?" I said, "Yes." She couldn't believe it. I said, "Reverend Beachstock?" He's famous throughout the whole world as a Jewish Rabbi. She was so taken in shock, but when she saw me perform, she couldn't believe me. After the finish, she came, held my hand like this, and she squeezed it. "How did you do it? How did you manage to do it?" She knows how to overcome. Because she was Jewish. They had to change their name, they were white skin. I told her, you know, I had it worse. And that's why she gave me a lot of credit. She said, "How were you able?" I said, "From bottom up." She looked at me. But I don't generally sing, only for special occasions. My very dear cousin passed away and I sang for her. Ordinarily I don't sing. I don't sing. Because an artist thinks differently, especially voice. Art, the top of all art is music, it's the most high celestial height. All music, the top is the voice. And of all the voices, the top is opera. You cannot go any more than that. So, when you're dedicated, other things you can still do, but voice, human body, that's your instrument. We use no microphone. If you use a mike, you're thrown off the stage. So, you have things that you can do, you cannot do. When you, because it's a physical thing, you cannot help it. If you're getting older and your voice is not able to hold the way you want it as an art, then you walk out. And never again. Yes. If you don't, and you go down, already, you never allow yourself to disintegrate. Stay up there and you walk out there, so you have to adhere to certain things. My brother, two years older than me. I don't know whether you can recognize his name, Eddie Suzuki. He's another ingenious person. You know, Hawaii is supposed to be relatively easy. All the different nationalities respect each other. The Hawaiian society, maybe you don't know it. When the Japanese come up, they don't like it, they shove you down. In the case of my brother, he's a born composer. Anything he does, he touches, becomes successful. He had the Honolulu Piano Company, Hawaii Piano Company, at nineteen years old. He opened that. It came so big. Big, big. Then, he used to always write very long. Every time he writes, Kui Lee, you know. He made Kui Lee. Managed Kui Lee. He discovered him. Andy Bumatai, Ernie Washington, my brother is a very fine musician and composer. All what he wrote, so far, Hawaiian people don't want to hear. They won't accept him.

Hawaiian-Chinese, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, they accept. But Japanese, they feel competition or something. They don't want you; they put you down.

MI: Was this after the war?

EW: Now. My brother is the only one, so far, in Hawaii music, that wrote a classic. It's a classic. Only Queen Liliuokalani wrote a classic. "Hawaii Ponoi." Aside from that, no other person wrote. The only other one, Eddie Suzuki. When he wrote his "Maile Lei" they made it nationally accepted. He wrote "Maile Lei" and they used it in the public schools, when the fifth grade, every teacher has in the curriculum, to teach Eddie Suzuki's "Maile Lei." And the "Star Spangled Banner." "America the Beautiful," "Hawaii Ponoi." That's the only one they have to teach with my brother's "Maile Lei." He wrote the only classic but so far, they hold him down, hold him down, don't recognize him. And the state found out the problem. The state made it possible to make a special award for him and Joe Naope. Joe Naope is the one who started the Merrie Monarch Festival. For the dance art, Joe Naope. For the song art, Eddie Suzuki. Only then, they made a special recognition, [Hawaii Music] Legacy Lifetime Achievement Award for my brother, the best songwriter of Hawaii, best songwriter, not just a composer of Hawaii. So now, the Hawaiian musicians [who] all oppose him, "Oh Eddie, can you write for us?" Only now, after fifty years. So, there is prejudice, all around. In beautiful paradise, Hawaii. You just have to know about it. And like my brother, I don't give a darn, I just do whatever I want, doesn't bother me. It's their problem; it's not my problem. And what did he do? He has the mother ranch to the Parker Ranch. Parker Ranch, all the cattle. Mr. Parker bought that portion; he made it into a cattle ranch. He wanted to make a horse ranch, [but] he wasn't able to. But my brother bought only a smaller portion, 10 acres from another man. Later on, the other man who bought his ranch, Mr. Waiiki. He came to my brother, "You want to buy my forty-eight acres?" Before the King, they allowed so and so much...they allowed to the other man. The other man couldn't keep it, and he came to my brother. You want to buy my ranch, forty-eight acres? And he did it only for horses. Horse ranch. Horses that race. So, he has that ranch and recently Akihito came to go to the observatory and to Parker Ranch. They had to go up on the Saddle Road, go up there. Now they name it Senator Inouye Highway. The Saddle Road. They found my brother's ranch, Suzuki. They stopped there, Akihito and Michiko, the whole Japanese entourage. They were watching all my brother's horses. My brother is that kind of person. Anything he does, he does it all alone because he really loves to do it. Strong-willed. And very humble because whatever he has, he gives to people. He knows what he wants, and he goes after it. Like me, I'm two years younger than him, like two peas in the pod. He is thinking. I remember when we used to grow up together. He said, "Chee, nothing is impossible, everything possible." That kind of attitude. Like my grandmother, in her way she said, "Just roll up your sleeve and do it. Don't make excuses." Like Uncle Minoru, the same thing. Nothing you can't do. You want to do it, you do it, because the purpose is good, then you must do it. You're elected. God gives you the instrument to do, you're just the servant. Make it come to be.

JK: Thank you, Emiko.

EW: You're very welcome.