

Interviewee: Rubiko Fukumoto

Interviewer: Peter Wakayama

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[Start Part 1]

***Note that this interview contains outdated terminology regarding Asian people.**

Rubiko Fukumoto: Should I mention my name first?

Peter Wakayama: Yeah, sure.

RF: [Reads from notes] My name is Ruby Fukumoto. I was born in Edmonton, Alberta, March the 12th, 1925. When I was a year and a half, my mother who was pregnant, took me to Japan and we stayed with relatives for about a year or more. My brother, Herb, was born there. When we came home to Canada, I apparently, I said to my mom, "Age wa doko no ojisan?" [who's that middle-aged man?] I had forgotten him. Actually, while in Japan I was calling my uncle, *otosan*, and my cousin would be very upset with me and she would tell me, "He is not your *otosan*, your *otosan*, is in faraway Canada." Our stay in Edmonton was short, and we then moved to Calgary. When I was about five, we moved to Victoria as the dry climate in Calgary affected my dad's health. The 12 years living in Victoria from kindergarten to grade 11 was a happy period of my life even though times were tough. I attended Japanese language school after regular school hours and I was active in sports such as softball, grass hockey, track and also participated in folk dancing. A group of us learned to do Japanese dancing, *odori*, and a little tap dancing and we performed at special events. About five or six of us were active, sporty type, and we rode our bike to Mrs. Scott's, a very well educated *issei* friend of our parents. She taught us *ochanoyu*, the Japanese tea ceremony and to compose *haiku*. In my teen years, one summer I worked for a family as a housemaid. The next summer I worked for a well-known artist, Emily Carr. At that time, she was not well and was in bed most of the time where her days were spent writing stories. She loved birds and had pigeons and cages outside, as well as birds inside. She also had a monkey as a pet. One day I was cleaning out one of the cages – bird cages, and somehow the bird flew out of the cage and out the window and was never seen again. Oh, was I in trouble. Emily Carr was very upset with me. The last summer, my parents let me go berry picking, and with the money I earned I bought myself a brand-new bike. I was so happy as my old bike was in very poor shape. As a matter of fact, I enjoyed bike riding until a few years ago. April 22nd, 1942, we were all sent to Vancouver, Hastings Park, to be more specific. Even though we had to live in animal stalls and had little privacy, line up to eat in

the mess hall, as we called the dining area, had a bout of food poisoning, it wasn't all that bad. We were able to do our correspondence courses with the help of some university students. We also played basketball and softball for some recreation. The sad part was when our fathers were sent to road camp and Kim said she was so surprised that I didn't shed a tear. [flips pages] For some reason unknown to me, our family along with another family were the first ones of the Victoria group to leave the park early in July 1942. We were sent to Slocan and since the houses in Bay Farm were not ready, we had to stay in the rink for a while. When they finally built – When they were finally built, we were able to have a house to ourselves as there were six of us. That was the stipulation, if you had – if you were a family of six you were allowed a house, if not you had to share it with another family. I was able to get a job in the office. Taking a commercial course in high school was helpful. Living in a Japanese community was a new experience for me as I was thankful to have made so many friends. It was a fun time for us teenagers as we had dances, concerts, movies and we went on hikes and picnics as well. We left Slocan in May 1945, one of the early families to leave once again. We were able to stop off at Calgary and see our relatives, the Inamasus and also in Regina we met the Tanoues. We arrived in Chatham where my family was scheduled to work for a Mr. Reed. They were sent to Goderich where they worked on a farm, and I stayed in Chatham and worked for Dr. Hicks and his wife as a maid. I only lasted a year, but I was able to find office work in a cleaning establishment. In the meantime, my family moved back to Chatham and found work in the city.

[00:05]

RF: I moved to Toronto in 1947 after I received a letter from my friend Kuni, who urged me to come join her. She had found accommodation on St. George Street, so I was eager to take off to the big city. She had already stayed there for a week when I arrived. It was a nice large room with a cot and a bed chesterfield. We decided we would take turns one week in the cot, one week on the bed chesterfield. So, I got to sleep in the cot after one week. That first weekend after we changed, I went to my friends who lived in the area and I remember telling them that mosquitos were really bad this summer and I was covered with bites. When I went back to our room, for some reason I examined my itchy spots. They looked different. They were bed bug bites. We pulled off the top sheet of the cot and there they were, those horrible dead creatures. Imagine Kuni had slept there for two whole weeks, and she didn't have a bite. We immediately packed our suitcases and walked out of there and down the street and luckily there was a house with a sign, "Room to rent," so we took it. We moved two more times in the same area and then I moved in with my family when they moved to Toronto. While baching together, we joined the badminton, tennis and ski clubs. By the way, I was able to find a job soon after I came to Toronto, I worked for Motor Express Terminals, King and Spadina area, a small company as a secretary and general

office worker. My boss was very good to me and a very reserved man who always called me Ms. Morita. Every time I got a raise, Kuni would tell her boss, and she would get a raise too. My boss, Mr. Pearson was very good to me and invited Kuni and I to dinner at his house with his family – wife and family. I always kept in touch with them until they both passed away several years ago. [turns page] I was married while working there and Shige and I were engaged for a whole year to save for our wedding. I think it was ten dollars a month-ten dollars a week, excuse me. Our reception was held at Muirheads on Adelaide Street, which is no longer there. And Kuni says their veal cutlet was a \$1.35 per person. Ours was chicken and so that – so the cost of it must've been similar. By the way, my wedding dress, a blush satin material was made by a dress maker and was \$35. The matron of honour and bridesmaids' dresses were \$25 each. And the flower girl's dress was \$15. I still have the bill to prove it. It seems incredible doesn't it, but at the same time wages were not too high then. Life was very good for Shige and I even though we had our ups and downs. We have three sons, three kind and thoughtful daughter-in-laws and ten loveable grandchildren. Shige and I enjoyed them in all their activities, it kept us quite busy. What more could you ask for? I've been on some adventures – Adventures and holidays, two to Japan. The first one was in 1985. Thanks to my sister, my brother and I got to sit in business class for the first time. How about that? It was in the Spring, and I was on a tour with the *ikebana* group for about ten days. And the I stopped off in Hiroshima for a few days and visited with friends. And went on to Fukuoka where my relatives lived. My brother, Herb, spent a month with them and felt right at home. I was there for two weeks, and they welcome me with open arms. I think they felt they knew Herb and I because we were there when we were young. [flips page] And my dad kept in touch with them and always sent pictures to – of our family. On one overnight trip, that we went on with our seven cousins on my dad's side, they rented a van and they sang all the way there. When we got to the *ryokan*, we all changed into *yukatas* and sat around, and they all took turns singing again. And they asked Herb to sing but he declined. Then they asked me. Being the shy type [gestures with right hand] I said I would, the only song that I could think of was, "Anata to yobeba, anata to kotaeru. Yama no kodama no ureshisa yo. 'Anata', 'Nandai?' Sora wa aozora, futari wa wakai." ¹

[00:10]

RF: The only song that I could think of – oh sorry. That was the only song that I knew all the words. My dad was always singing and that was one of the songs he used to sing. He also knew all the English songs of his time, and he used to- My dad always was singing and that

¹ [When I call you "dear", you reply with "dear". That's the joy of a mountain echo. "Dear", "What is it?" The sky is blue and we are both young - from "Futari wa wakai" [We are both young] (1935) by Dick Mine & Reiko Hoshi (big hit at the time)]

was one of the songs he used to sing. He also knew all of the English songs of his time, which leads me to another incident. My dad would never miss going to the Fukuoka-ken get togethers. After my mom passed away, my sister accompanied him once or twice and then I said I would go with him. This one time we had gone to the Anglican church first and then on to the Buddhist church. As we drove along Bloor Street, I said to my dad, "Why don't you sing an English song for a change?" He said, "What shall I sing?" So, I came up with My Blue Heaven. So, he agreed, and we sang it all the way there. [Sings] "Whippoorwills call, evenin' is nigh, I hurry to my blue heaven. I'll turn to the right, a little white light will lead you to my blue heaven. You'll see a smiling face, a fireplace, a cozy room, and a little nest that nestles where the roses bloom. Just Molly and me, and baby makes three, we're happy in my Blue Heaven." When we got there, they had a short meeting and then we had *bento* and then on with the entertainment. As usual, they asked my dad to sing first and he gladly went to the front and to my disappointment, he sang his favourite *naniwa-bushi*. However, it was still time [turns page] – time left, and they asked if anyone would like to sing or dance or whatever, they were most welcome to do so. Without missing a beat I said to my dad, "Here is your opportunity to sing an English song," and without further prompting he went up and he sang My Blue Heaven and another song. Practicing the song on the way there was not in vain. After 25 years, being a stay-at-home mom, I decided to look for a part time job. My son Barry was looking at the church newsletter and he saw an ad for a church secretary, and he said, "Here's a job for you, mom." I applied and I got the job. I worked there for about 11 years and then went out – turned 65, my girlfriends said, "You need to retire, we have to play golf." I felt bad retiring because I enjoyed working at the church getting to know a lot of people, but I am still involved as a volunteer at the church. The other thing I did when I turned 65 was take up tap dancing. I continued for seven years. I continued to be as active as I was in my youth, although I must admit I've slowed down somewhat. And I enjoy adventures with my family and friends. That's it. So, you - [cuts off]

PW: [unknow interviewer]: You said you went to housework for Emily Carr, she was a painter, right?

RF: Yep. She wasn't all that famous yet.

PW: But did you see her painting, when you were doing housework?

RF: I saw paintings there, yes.

PW: Yeah. Well, that's quite a - [RF: Yeah] really – How long were you there at -?

RF: Just one summer

PW: Oh, one summer.

RF: One summer.

PW: As a house -

RF: And because she wasn't – Well she wasn't in the best of moods. [PW: Oh right. Yeah.] She was in bed all the time.

PW: Oh, was she? [RF: Mm-hm] Right. Yeah.

RF: As a matter of fact, she had an older sister living with her, it was a big house [PW: Yes.] and she would bring lunch to her. And one time there was a fly in her soup, [gasps] Emily was just so upset. [laughs] But you know, it was an experience.

PW: You said you were born in Edmonton [RF: Mm-hm] How come your dad – your parents were in Edmonton?

RF: Well, my dad came to Canada when he was about 16 or 17. [PW: Right] He had a brother and his wife living in – I don't whether they were living in Edmonton but he also had an uncle and an aunt and cousins living in Calgary. They were really early pioneers [PW: Yeah] in that area. [PW: Right.] My uncle Inamasu, as a matter of fact, had race horses. Yep, and he had brought them to Vancouver and they did quite well, yeah. And as a matter of fact, he brought one horse when we were in Toronto. [PW: laughs] And they were race – he was racing it at Dufferin Racetrack, so I took the time off, and I went to the race.

[0:15]

RF: But I don't think it did that well then, but he was – he always liked – he raced a couple of them, race horses.

PW: You said you went to Japan for you and your brother, right? What was the reason why you went?

RF: Well, you see my mother married when she was 16. My dad was 22 and my dad, you know, had these relatives in Canada and my mom didn't know anybody. So, when she was 16, she got married and she couldn't even come to Canada right away after they were married because she had this eye infection and at that time, they wouldn't allow her to go right away until it was healed. But anyway, because she, you know, had a very hard first pregnancy, she was only 18 and the baby died. And then she had me a year later and then she was pregnant with Herb, so she needed to- she wanted to go back to Japan. So I don't remember much cause I was only a year and a half.

PW: Okay. So how long were you there?

RF: Just about a year or more.

PW: Oh, so you were young and you don't remember too much of the –

RF: No.

PW: Yeah. And how old was your brother?

RF: Well, he was born there.

PW: Oh, he was born there.

RF: Yeah, Herb was born there.

PW: Herb was born there,

RF: Mm-hm.

PW: okay, right. And he came back after – with you at the same time?

RF: Oh yeah.

PW: Yeah. [RF: Yup.] And did the family come back? The whole family – I mean your mom too?

RF: Yeah, like my mom and Herb and I.

PW: Okay.

RF: Yeah, we came back. Because my dad stayed in Canada.

PW: Okay, right. Then you said you went to Chatham.

RF: Mm-hm.

PW: Where did you live in Chatham?

RF: Well, I lived in where I worked, the first year.

PW: Dr. Hicks?

RF: Yeah, Dr. Hicks. I forget just where it was, it was right by the river. [gestures with her right hand]

PW: Yes, right.

RF: It was nice place.

PW: Yeah.

RF: And then when my family moved back to the city, they were – They got a house – They lived in a farmhouse just outside of Chatham. I forget the name of the place, not far from

Chatham, just outside. And so, I stayed there while I worked at the cleaning establishment. But I only stayed a year. And that's when Kuni wrote me a letter and said, "Why don't come over."

PW: And did you associate with many of the Japanese Canadians that were living in Chatham? Because there was fairly a large community of Japanese Canadians.

RF: Yeah, I did a little bit. Not a lot but I did a little bit.

PW: Yeah. Because I grew up in Chatham.

RF: Oh, did you?

PW: Oh yeah.

RF: Oh, for heaven's sakes.

PW: Yeah, after we came out from B.C.

RF: Oh yeah, what year was that you came out?

PW: Well, I guess it would be '45 or '46 after New Denver. We came from New Denver to – To actually Cedar Springs which is just outside [RF: Oh yeah.] of, you know, Chatham.

RF: Well, the first family that I worked for, Dr. Hicks and his wife, they had a cottage down in Cedar Springs.

PW: Oh, right, Lake Erie.

RF: So, yeah, I was down there.

PW: Yeah, okay. And yeah, because you know there's connections there [laughs].

RF: Yeah, because we moved, you know, out East in '45.

PW: Yeah, right. So, you were one of the early ones then?

RF: Mm-hm. I don't know how come, you know?

PW: And then your dad – What did your dad do, when he came to Toronto?

RF: He just worked in factories, sweater factories.

PW: Oh okay.

RF: My dad worked at the Pallisser Hotel in Calgary and the Empress Hotel in Victoria.

PW: Victoria. And, actually he lived to be a long – to a great old age.

RF: 96, he was.

PW: Yeah, right, yeah, I remember your dad. Yeah. You were friends with the Yamamotos too, aren't ya? Your dad?

RF: My dad was.

PW: Your dad was.

RF: Oh yeah.

PW: Right.

RF: He was a good friend of Mr. Yamamoto.

PW: Yeah, right, right. Well, that's wonderful, that's really great. That's- [camera cut]

RF: They have a letter; they got a letter from Japan to say that they had heard from this uncle. So, when they found out where he lived, he and my brother they went down to meet this uncle. And of course he was getting quite on, and he couldn't speak Japanese, he'd forgotten it all. He could only speak Spanish. He couldn't speak English. So they had an interpreter there. But this uncle was so happy to see my dad, because he hadn't seen relatives for, you know, years. Anyway, this uncle married a Mexican woman, and she had about four or five children, and she died. And then so he married again. He had about six or seven more children after that. So, we have millions of relatives in Mexico [laughs].

[0:20]

RF: And my brother was quite keen on, you know, going down there. He went down there several times, this is not Herb, this is Morris my younger brother. So, we started to wonder whether he found a girlfriend there or not, but no, he was just interested in the family.

PW: In the history, yeah.

RF: And so anyway, oh they – We found out they had get togethers every three months and who ever could get together, we met.

PW: Right.

RF: So a couple of years ago I went for the first time because my brother had gone a few times, like he's forever going down to Mexico. And so, it was great, they were all so friendly and you know, they were all so outgoing and they loved to sing and dance and that. And they had this get together and I remember one of the cousins, he – They were quite proud of their Japanese heritage.

PW: Oh yeah, right.

RF: So he would say, he would bring out a chair and say, "Morita, Morita," and you know really [laughs], you know. But it was kinda nice to know that they, you know, valued their Japanese heritage.

PW: And were you able to communicate with them in English?

RF: Well, some of them.

PW: Or how good is your Spanish?

RF: Some of them spoke English very well.

PW: Yeah, the younger ones.

RF: Most of them did not, they spoke Spanish. But-

PW: So how did you communicate with these- with your relatives?

RF: Well, we spoke to the ones that spoke English, and they would, yeah.

PW: Oh right, translate.

RF: But most of them looked Mexican. But there was one little girl who, who maybe a year and a half or so, she looked quite oriental.

PW: Oh really?

RF: Yeah, and she was maybe third or fourth generation. But when we looked at pictures of the immediate family of my uncle- Of my dad's uncle at least, some of them looked Japanese. But as they grew older, they looked more Mexican.

PW: Oh really?

RF: Yeah.

PW: Wow.

RF: And then there's one Mexican cousin, she came to Toronto to improve her English, and it was like a three-month course and you lived with a family. Well, she met a German fellow from Germany, who was doing the same thing. And this German fellow, he really liked Suzie, so they kind of went around and he visited her in Mexico and she went to Germany and they got married. So, couple of - Not last fall the year before, my brother Morris and my sister, we went to Europe and we visited - We went to Austria first because my brother's friend had a friend there, we had a lovely time there because we knew my - We knew some people there. We got to know, I should say, and he showed us around and it was so nice.

And then we went to Germany to Hamburg, that's where Suzie and George lived, and Suzie showed us around Hamburg, and we met her in-laws. It was really nice.

PW: How was the connection to your Hawaiian relatives? How's that work?

RF: Well, they had first cousins there and their father was Shig's father's brother. But he had a different name because apparently, he went by Yoshi. Their name is O'Hara.

PW: Oh,] an Irish family [laughs].

RF: [laughs] And then this past – This last summer one of the daughters came to Toronto on a course, and her parents had said to her, "You know you have relatives in Toronto, you should look them up." So, she did look us up and we got together, a few of us. And it was really nice to meet her, she was very outgoing.

PW: Oh right, yeah. I think Hawaiians are really nice, outgoing people. Really nice.

RF: Mm-hm. So are Mexicans. At least our relatives are. And this cousin that married this German fellow, he was really nice but they're all so different. I mean they're just the opposite. So, Suzie had, you know, quite an adjustment to make, but she's very outgoing so she could do okay.

PW: Well, that's great. That's great. Well- [Cuts at 24:29]