

**Interviewee: Aiko Kondo  
Murakami**  
**Interviewer: Peter Wakayama**  
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THE JAPANESE CANADIAN LEGACY PROJECT

**[Start Part 1]**

Peter Wakayama: Where and when you were born?

Aiko Kondo Murakami: My name is Aiko. My maiden name was Kondo. My name was Murakami and I was born in Steveston March the 13th, 1917 and today is my birthday.

PW: Happy birthday, Aiko. You said that your birth certificate had it on the 17<sup>th</sup>.

AKM: Yes.

PW: Do you know why, what happened then?

AKM: I think it's pretty hard for them to register all of us, have to be registered in Victoria so I guess there's always a difference in age. Some young people like my friends didn't even have birth certificate.

PW: Can you tell us about your parents, where they came from?

AKM: They came from Wakayama and there was Kishu. There was called Mio, Mio-mura and there were so many people from there that immigrated to Steveston. They used to call it America-mura. They never said Canada because but they didn't know where Canada was but they knew it was America.

PW: I understand your father was a fisherman in Steveston.

AKM: Yeah.

PW: Is the, he didn't do fishing in Japan, did he?

AKM: No.

PW: Did he work for somebody? Did he have a fishing boat? Do you remember?

AKM: I think all he told me was: he was an eight-month baby, he said so he was very small compared to the brother who was quite a bit taller and so he used to work on the railroads. But he didn't have to do any physical work. Being a smaller person, he used to do some bookkeeping and told us the time he had to go to town to get the money for the employees and the way to have protection was to carry hot cayenne pepper. These are the stories I used to hear when I was young.

PW: Do you know why he came to Canada, the reason he came to Canada?

AKM: I think it was for adventure. Of course, there was a very small village in Mio-mura and so many people were leaving and they all ended up in Steveston. I mean, it was a village of Japanese.

PW: You moved to Victoria when you were six months old, your family moved there?

AKM: [nods]

PW: What was the reason for moving to Victoria from Steveston?

AKM: I think, my father thought it was an easier place to live than Stevenson so I always thank my lucky star that we, my family, moved to Victoria.

PW: You mentioned that the Steveston people had this kind of strange half Japanese, half English language where you were lucky to go to Victoria and they had more proper English.

AKM: Because the people were Stevenson weren't speaking good Japanese. It was [miobang?] you know and then their English was so terrible too so I was always thankful that we moved to Victoria. After all, it's the capital city of British Columbia.

PW: Tell us about your family and your siblings, your brothers and sisters?

AKM: I had two brothers and two sisters. My youngest sister was the only one born in Victoria. We were-

PW: Sorry go ahead.

AKM: We always thought that we were poor. When I talked to people today, I talked to my son and we used to have beach parties and get all the vegetables and everything from the farmers and my dad used to give them fish, sort of like a barter system.

PW: Where in Victoria did you live?

AKM: Being a fisherman and he had the boat by the inner harbour, we lived near Chinatown. The only Japanese family were the Shimizu's who had a rice mill.

[5 minutes]

PW: And so, you were in the Chinatown in Victoria. So, you had Chinese and hakujin friends?

AKM: The isseis are funny, you know. They didn't want us to be friendly with the Chinese and then of course we weren't really accepted by the hakujin people, the anglo. So, we sort of kept to ourselves.

PW: Victoria was a port city.

AKM: Port of cul.

PW: Tell us about the Japanese ships that used to come in and your mother's involvement with the immigrants.

AKM: When the ships came and the young brides came in, they came in kimono in those days. So, my mother used to take them to a, not the Hudson Bay Company, but to a place where my mother knew some people and these ladies got their western clothes. I remember going with my mother because she didn't speak English and I knew a bit. I was only seven or eight and I was sort of like interpreter.

PW: At a young age. How was your education in Victoria? Tell us about that.

AKM: I went to a school called Northward School. The [quadprimary] first and then Northward School and I went to Victoria High School due to depression and I remember, I said I should quit school and start to help, you know. My parents said no, you finish high school. When I come to think of it, when we lost everything after Pearl Harbour, they can't take your education away but you can lose all your material things. I remember my mother, she really had a lot of what I call horse sense because she said you just finished school.

PW: So, you finished high school?

AKM: Yes, high school in Victoria. First of all, I wanted to go off to university but that was a depression so I decided to take commercial which was a good thing. I was going back and forth about whether it was a good thing because I learned to type.

PW: There were some Japanese in Victoria was there, besides your family? How many people?

AKM: I'm not very good at statistics you know, just a few.

PW: Tell us about Oriental House.

AKM: Oriental Home?

PW: Yes.

AKM: Well, Oriental Home, before they moved to the building there, there used to be a Chinese- No, women were brought in as prostitutes and then, they used to run away and go to a place of refuge they call it and that was the start of the Oriental home. It was mostly Chinese women. Then after, then it became Oriental home for some orphans, mostly Chinese children. If their mother died or some of them were living in [Salmonarm?], they came to this Oriental Home. It was run by the Methodist church and after became the United Church of Canada.

PW: There was another story you were telling about your mother working in Skeena.

AKM: Pardon?

[10 minutes]

PW: You were telling about your mother working in Skeena.

AKM: First year, my mother went up to Skeena, father went fishing. They said, you work from morning till night. She didn't know about the northern lights, just thought it never got dark. She thought she had to work until dark.

PW: Yeah. So, did you enjoy school?

AKM: Yes, I liked- Yes, I enjoyed school. All my teachers were nice. All my teachers were Scottish, English like Ms. [McKellican?], Norman Forbes, J. M. Campbell. I remember Mr. Campbell came from Nova Scotia, Annapolis Valley, and used to talk

about his apples. Same old story all year. His sons became teachers at Victoria High school.

PW: You had also at school, a person called [Ira Dilward?]?

AKM: Yeah. At Victoria High School?

### **[End Part 1]**

### **[Start Part 2]**

PW: Tell us about [Ira Dilward?]

AKM: [Ira Dilward?] was our principal at Victoria High School and he was a great one too. We had assembly in the morning and he always used to play some kind of music for us and explain it, which was very good. And then after, he was transferred to UBC and he became the Head of the English department and then, I had a friend called [Aiko Henmi]. She was very talented and he's the one that made sure she went out to UBC.

PW: Didn't [Ira?] become the head of CBC?

AKM: Yes, he became head of CBC.

PW: You play sports in Victoria?

AKM: Yeah, I used to pitch.

PW: Softball?

AKM: Well, I used to be a bit of a tomboy because my nickname was Mike.

PW: So, they called you Mike not Aiko?

AKM: Yeah.

PW: So, what other sports did you play?

AKM: We used to go swimming a lot in the gorge. When you come to think of it, it's polluted now. There was the Japanese Gorge tea gardens and I think we-

### **[End Part 2]**

### **[Start Part 3]**

AKM: So then, of course, we used to go those beach parties and things, we kept ourselves pretty busy.

PW: You were involved in the Japanese Canadian Citizens league, can you tell me about that.

AKM: Oh yes, we used to have our chapter in Victoria and often times we used to go to Vancouver for their, what you call, conferences and they used to send me. That's how I met a lot of Vancouver friends.

PW: The, when you were, when did you go to Vancouver and why?

AKM: I went to Vancouver to take-, I wasn't very interested in dressmaking or anything but that was the only reason why I was able to go to Vancouver to enroll in [Varista's?] school, Marietta's School of Costume Design. But halfway through, the war started so she gave us sort of a half of a diploma.

PW: So, you were in Vancouver when the War started?

AKM: Yes.

PW: What was your reaction when the war started?

AKM: I thought it was just terrible. Even before the war, my brothers were off and a lot of my friends in Victoria were losing their jobs. There were a lot of people working at the [unclear] hotel. First of all, in 1939, a lot of people lost their jobs. But when Pearl Harbour, lots of them didn't even go back because they knew they would tell them don't come back. It was a very sad time because I was in Vancouver but my family were in Victoria. Many a nights, I didn't have anyone to talk to because I was with a Canadian family and the funny part of this, the father, they were Germans but nothing happened to them.

PW: And-

### **[End Part 3]**

### **[Start Part 4]**

PW: So, your reaction when you heard about the war. What was your reaction since you were in Vancouver by yourself?

AKM: Well, all I heard was that everybody losing their jobs and then I thought it was just terrible. Then we started getting all this curfew and you, when you went out, you have some people spitting at you and all that. I experienced all that and it was just awful.

PW: So, was there a lot of discrimination before Pearl Harbour happened?

AKM: Oh, there was always.

PW: In Victoria?

AKM: Anywhere, even university graduate couldn't get a job. I always remember when I was in Victoria with all the Parliament buildings. When I was going to high school, they said, there's no use taking civil service exam since they won't give you a job. They told you right off the bat that you weren't going to go anywhere with-.

PW: Is that why you got into the domestic-?

AKM: Well, it was the only job you can get. They always wanted Japanese Canadian girls to work because even my friend, [Aiko Henmi?], was working as domestic and she finished UBC.

PW: So, you were, when the war started, had you met your husband before that time?

AKM: Oh, I know what happened. We thought it was ultimate when we went to a New Year's Eve Party, I mean to a thing at Hotel Vancouver. I was invited to go and when the war started, after Pearl Harbour, you weren't welcome any place and then, I was going to a sewing school. The girls there from Strawberry Hill. One of the girls said, "Aiko what are you doing for New Year's Eve?" I said nothing and she said, "My brother will come and pick you up, we are all going to a place called [Sunbury?] and that was- So they picked me up and I went there. There was this party just by the wharf you know. And that's where people like [Lute Tanabi?] from Vancouver, the boys heard about the parties and they came out to [Sunbury?]. And that's where I met my husband.

PW: And that was in 1942?

AKM: Yes.

PW: When did you get married?

AKM: May the 7<sup>th</sup>, 1943.

PW: Tell us about your family's reaction to you marrying.

AKM: They said, they said, "Oh, we don't know the family called Murakamis." They can't tell because the Japanese Council, you know, was closed and they can't tell what kind of family he comes from and said, "You should just stay engaged." But then my father said, "We have been trying to marry Aiko off for years and she won't get married. If she wants to get married, let her get married." and that's how we got married. I was married at the [Paul] Street United Church. Ten days later, we were off to Kaslo.

PW: You were in an interned with Kaslo with your husband?

AKM: And there wasn't a room for a family so the men were all segregated in different places. And half the time, we didn't know where Dave was because they got moved here and there. Kaslo was a nice city, you know, it was supposed to be a city.

[5 minutes]

PW: What did you do in Kaslo while Dave and-?

AKM: I got a job at the staff house where the government people live and so I cook for them and all that.

PW: And then, your husband was not with you at that time? The whole time?

AKM: He was there and then he got a job to drive a truck around cause he had a driver's license and my parents had to go to Sandon. Sandon was way up in the mountains and nothing grows there. So, my husband used to get all the vegetables from Kaslo and drive the truck all the way to Sandon. Was terrible roads, you know.

PW: I understand Dave ended up at the New Denver sanatorium.

AKM: Yeah. Then, Dr. [Shimutakara?] were always worried about TB because they used to hide it. My husband used to have a scar in his lungs, he had [unclear] or

something. He didn't have TB but he got shipped to New Denver. So, we finally- Michael was only four years old, so we went to New Denver to work. I was asked if I would help at the staff house there. And [Henry Shimizu] was the only teacher there. They said they needed teachers to teach the kids because the government, federal government moved us and the schools were run by provincial government. They said they had no reason to take in any of the Japanese schools so they recruited and then we went to summer school for a while and then we taught. In the first place, I had home economics. Of course, I had a good training in Victoria. I thought about what I did when I was going to school and that's how we managed. I don't know whether you have seen the pictures of the school.

PW: You then went to summer school and were promoted to Vice-Principal?

AKM: Because I was married and most of them were younger and I got a job right away. After, everybody was supposed to move out east so the teachers were moving and that's how I got to be the Principal in no time flat.

PW: How was your teaching experience in New Denver?

AKM: Well, see, I was one of the older, some were just out of high school themselves. Being the principal, I had to go to the classes. When they heard my footsteps, the kids were quiet. They took advantage of all the teachers but I don't know how we all managed but somehow, we did. We had PTA meetings and I remember telling parents that you just have to tell your children to behave themselves because the teachers can't cope and then said, we won't have anyone teaching the children if you don't tell them to behave. And so, they all went home and I guess, gave the children the one, two. After that, they all behaved and took a little more respect for all the teachers.

PW: I understand that when you had the PTA meeting, at the end of the meeting, they bowed.

AKM: After that, they bowed down. In Japan, the teachers were somebody. It's said they couldn't even walk on their shadow.

[10 minutes]

PW: And your husband, what did he do in New Denver?

AKM: [laughing] I can't remember.

PW: No, it's okay. So, after New Denver, I also understand you stayed at the house in the downtown area, and then your son was looked after by your grandparents?

AKM: Yeah. He used to say this, Aiko-chan mama and ban-chan mama so he had two mothers.

PW: And he came home to your place on the weekends?

AKM: Yes.

PW: What was food and cooking like and meals in the internment camps?

AKM: We, I have to remember, we went to Kaslo. The grocery store was hardly- It was all ghost towns we were in and the only food they had was pork and cabbage. So, the big joke was what did you have lunch? Pork and cabbage. What did you have for supper? Cabbage and pork. And that was the big joke til the food start coming in.

PW: Some of the people in New Denver grew their own vegetables in the garden that they made. Did you do that?

AKM: No, I don't. My mother always said [unclear]

PW: After New Denver, how long were in New Denver?

AKM: Oh, gee- I can't remember, three or four years.

PW: And then you came out east?

AKM: We got to, we had friends and they met us at Union Station and I remember my friends they stayed there. We went to Hamilton first and then we left Hamilton for Toronto.

PW: Did you like Hamilton?

AKM: No, we didn't. It was terrible. I mean, after the people in the mountains lived in lovely homes but the downtown was just terrible.

PW: Did you stay very long in Hamilton?

AKM: No.

PW: And then you came to Toronto?

AKM: That's how we got the job up at Forest Hill and then we found the house down at 83 Metcalfe Street and my family all came. It was like Hasting Parks there since they all came to the house. We all lived in a [radio subsistent?] block and then we all, [unclear] was going to the suburbs to live. So, we went to 306 Prince Avenue, which is Sheppard and Yonge.

PW: When you came to Toronto, you worked as a domestic for a hakujin house?

AKM: Yes.

PW: And that's a job that you could get. Tell us about what Dave did while working in Toronto.

AKM: Well, he got a job on, I remember it was Michael's birthday. There was an ad in the paper, watch maker. It wasn't a watchmaker, it was the Harding brothers that looked after clocks for night watchmen. They had to watch the night watchmen because they weren't at the right places. They had to use this clock to punch in, that's what I understood. He worked there for years until he retired.

PW: When did you start working?

AKM: [laughing]

PW: Or where did you start working?

AKM: I went to Ryerson when Michael was just six years old. The reason why I went. We thought, my husband, we thought that we would open a watch making and I took jewelry arts. Not that I- There were really a lot of allied subjects at the



time cause that was when the return soldiers you know [unclear]. After that, what did I do?

[15 minutes]

PW: When did start pursuing it?

AKM: I went to work at, first at a Jewish Jewellers downtown on Yonge Street. Then I got a job at Lacey's brothers, they had, they sold [unclear] for watchmakers, supplies. There, I was very happy for working there. Then my sister said, "There's an ad for secretary for a Japanese firm. So why don't you go and try? After five o'clock, I went down to 77 York Street which is now the high-rise industry. I went there and I applied for a job. I think, there were quite a few people applied. By the time I got back to 83 Metcalfe, had a phone call saying, can I come in tomorrow? I said, "No, I have to give a week's notice". This was the time we were moving up to the suburbs so everything was happening at the same time. There were only two people there, a man called Mr. [Oaki?] and a man called Mr. Sato. I started working there from 1955.

PW: How did you find working for a Japanese company?

AKM: At the first, all we did was make tea for them. But then I had to do a lot of extra things like their wives would come and, in those days, they didn't speak English. I had to look after their kids, get them into school or find a place for them to live. So, I was really girl Friday. But I really got to know them all, I had about five or six Presidents you know. They changed every five years until I retired. What year was I retired? I was 65.

PW: When you were conversing with them in Japanese?

AKM: I told them I didn't know any Japanese but then they knew that I could speak Japanese and that. I didn't put it on that I knew Japanese since I wasn't getting a job to read or write Japanese so they just took me for-. I always had to talk to the women and then, they said, "you speak Japanese, you are talking to our wives cause they didn't understand English". When I come to think about, I really enjoy those people and I had all good bosses. They were all presidents you know except one. I could write a book.

PW: Did you take formal lessons in Japanese, in Victoria or BC?

AKM: Pardon?

PW: Did you take formal Japanese language school?

AKM: No, my father thought that we would grow up as a Canadian. But when he felt that all the discrimination, he decided to send to Japanese school. I didn't go to Japanese school until I started going to high school so I'm not really good at writing.

PW: You were fine in conversation?

AKM: I got through all those Japanese books you know every year but that's what happened. Because like kids in Steveston they were good at Japanese but not very

good in English. I was very good in English but not very good in Japanese but I had enough knowledge to speak to these women that came from you know, their wives. I still have friends from those days. Even today, there are some offspring that know me. They used to call me Canada no mama-san.

PW: In Toronto, you got involved with the Japanese community.

AKM: Oh yes.

PW: What did you do?

[20 minutes]

AKM: Well in Toronto, it was 1947, we all sort of got together you know and then, they didn't have the centre in those days. So much things happening, can't remember all the things we used to do.

PW: You told me you were involved with the Momiji Foundation with the healthcare project. What did you do with that group?

AKM: Well Fred Sasaki was the treasurer. Oh yes, we had to get donations and we had to send out receipts. So, I had to go down to the office. When I had all these, I had to go to Fred's office where he worked for Canadian Tire, [unclear]. I really received a lot of experience in doing different things.

PW: Were you involved in the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre at any time? When they were trying to put the building together at first?

AKM: So many things. When they had a bazaar, I was one of the first bazaar conveners and I don't know, there were so many things I did that I can't remember now.

PW: But you were heavily involved in the cooking, bazaars and the community events at the centre?

AKM: Yes.

PW: Were you involved in the redress movement?

AKM: Yes, from day one.

PW: Tell us about that.

AKM: Well, there were so many things. I'm sort of a blank this morning you know.

PW: But you were heavily involved in the redress?

AKM: Yes.

PW: When did you move up to Edmonton?

AKM: When I moved up to Edmonton, what year did I go?

PW: You moved out because your son Michael was going out there?

AKM: Oh yes, our grandson was born, that's the reason why.

PW: That you went out?

AKM: Oh yes, '88, that was the year we sold our 306 Prince. It happened for a couple of years that the people around there wanted to, wanted to buy our house. We didn't

want to. They said, "You will get enough, more money to live in the suburbs with a bigger house. On 306 Prince, they wanted to build a big condominium, millionaire condominium at Sheppard and Yonge, just before you get down to Bathurst. We sold the house; they gave us cash and everything. And then, we had a cottage and we sold it in one week. Right after that, the real estate went right down and the house is still standing there.

PW: So, your timing was good?

AKM: [nods]

PW: And were you a widow by that time you moved out there?

AKM: No, we were-

PW: So, you both moved out.

AKM: Then, this house that we owned down yet, down by 85 and fifth avenue in Edmonton. We got it and built it with the money we got from selling the 306 and the cottage, we gutted the whole building and we had a basement, three stories, and the top floor was Michael's office and it's still standing there. It's a historical house, hysterical people live there. [laughing]

PW: How was the life in Edmonton compared to Toronto?

[25 minutes]

AKM: Well, I had some friends there you know from way back and they said it was a terrible cold place but actually, it was the climate was changing. I don't know how many years that we stayed there.

PW: Did you enjoy living in Edmonton?

AKM: Yes.

PW: Was there a fairly large Japanese community when you were there?

AKM: There were but you know all my friends that I met there were from Japan and married to a GI or, so I have all those friends there. I enjoyed Edmonton. I had some friends in Taber, they are from Victoria so I used to travel back to Calgary and Taber, Alberta.

PW: Did the Japanese community do several events or gatherings in Edmonton?

AKM: They had girls' festivals and boys' festivals. In fact, one of my big things was for some reason, Michael got invited to the dinner for the Queen and Prince Philip. So, we were the only one dining with 1000 people there.

PW: Did they have a cultural centre?

AKM: Yes, community centre.

PW: Community centre. Were you and Mike heavily involved, quite heavily involved?

AKM: Yes.

PW: Still relatively active?

AKM: Yes.

PW: You lived now 92 years in Canada.

AKM: Pardon.

PW: You lived now 92 years in Canada. What's your comments about the [unclear] community here?

AKM: It was very active, you know. I really enjoyed, we would always say, "what ghost town are you from?" That was the question we always asked, "You know so and so from Tashme" or they said they were from New Denver or Kaslo and there's always something. The girls who came directly instead of going to ghost towns, they came to Toronto. I actually, if I didn't marry Dave, I would have come and worked for [Agnes McFail?]. Well, good thing I didn't because if I did, I think I would have been an old maid.

PW: What do you think about the future of the Japanese Canadians because there's a lot of intermarriages now and what's going to happen to our Japanese Canadian heritage?

AKM: I think they think about their Japanese, you know, heritage and sometimes they are more interested in the kids from Japan. What's going, what's happening, things Japanese.

PW: You have any other comments you want to make about anything?

AKM: Not particularly. [laughing] I'm running out of steam.

PW: Well, it's your birthday. We don't want to keep you too long. Thank you so much. It's been really a great commentary about your life. I hope you live to be a hundred in two [unclear].

**[End Part 4]**