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Oral history interview with Johsel Namkung,
1989 Oct. 5-1991 Feb. 25

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Johsel Namkung on October 5, 1989. The interview took place in Seattle, Washington, and was conducted by Alan Chong Lau for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[Note: This interview is more informal than some oral histories. Alan Lau and Kazuko Nakane visited Johsel Namkung while they were conducting a survey of artists for the Northwest Asian American Project. Their conversation with Namkung was so productive that they returned a second time, this time bringing a tape-recorder and recording the conversation. AL's reference on page one, "I think the last part. . . ." pertains to the first, unrecorded conversation. To complete JN's history, David Takami conducted an interview on February 25, 1991, that covered JN's family and early years.—Ed.]

[Note: Because there were four people present at this interview, and because they sometimes all spoke at once, I have not always followed the exact chronological sequencing of speakers but have attempted instead to sort out the utterances into a conceptual sequence. The reader should also be aware that the Namkungs often speak as a team, with one starting a thought and the other completing it.—Trans.]

Interview

[Tape 1, side A]

KAZUKO NAKANE: October third, '89, at Mr. Namkung's.

ALAN LAU: Late. [laughs]

KAZUKO NAKANE: Eight, twenty.

ALAN LAU: I think the last part was we had already got you over to Seattle. You were working with the airlines?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, that was after I finished my master's at the University of Washington.

ALAN LAU: Oh, okay. And your master's was in. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Music.

ALAN LAU: In music.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

ALAN LAU: And then I guess you told me you had realized that it wasn't possible for you to pursue a career singing German lieder because there was no demand.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right.

ALAN LAU: How did you get into photography? Didn't somebody at the airlines have something to do with it at the time?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, yeah, it's sort of out of frustration after I went to Northwest Airlines to work for them, and the schedule was so irregular I couldn't keep up with the singing, its practice. Singing is just like athletic, you know, like playing tennis or football or anything like that. You have to constantly keep in shape and at tuning up your muscles. And it. . . . Tuning of athletic muscles and the tuning of singing voice muscles or playing piano, it's all analogous. And because of lack of time to practice I was not able to sing. And because of the frustration of the lack of an expression, self-expression, I picked up a camera and at Mineko's urge to record children's growth.

ALAN LAU: Uh huh, so that's how you started.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. So I got a couple of cameras, one 35 millimeter, and the other is a two and a quarter by two and a quarter, and started taking pictures. But, just like any other endeavor, I engage myself in, always when I start, I become really. . . .

ALAN LAU: Obsessed. [laughs]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . obsessed, yes. [laughs] And I was spending a lot of time photographing, and just

photographing was not satisfactory, so I had to develop and print and enlarge and so on and so forth.

ALAN LAU: You had your own darkroom?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, I was using a friend's. And finally after three or four years I thought that I should be more serious about it, and 1956 or '7, I decided I had enough time with the airlines, and I quit and went to see Mr. Chao-Chen Yang, whether he would take me in as his apprentice. And so I started apprenticing with him, and studied all different phases of photography, black and white and color, but especially in color, for nine months. First we started with a dye-transfer process, and then, after about three or four months with him, Eastman Kodak introduced the so-called Type C process, which is starting with a color negative and then printing on paper. And that's what I studied. And I became quite proficient, and he put me in charge of Type C operation in his laboratory. And after nine months, I thought I had enough experience, and so I decided to go into work somewhere to make some money, because during that nine months Mineko supported me.

ALAN LAU: Oh, you were, it was like a traditional deshi system.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Exactly.

ALAN LAU: You weren't paid, you just learned, and donated your time.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Apprentice, right. [laughs] And that _____ are, it's Chinese. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Just donated time, right.

ALAN LAU: It's rare, rare to see that in Seattle.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, well, that's what I wanted to do, you know, like Oriental system. And learning, from cleaning the room and gradually get into the position that you become a responsible person. And, unlike Japan, it didn't take that long. I mean, nine months' time was. . . .

ALAN LAU: Well, in Japan I think they make it longer just so you have to wait.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right. Yes. Slave labor. [all laugh]

ALAN LAU: What was your early work like? I know that everybody who knows your work is familiar with the images of nature, but did you start out like that, or. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, it's interesting that in retrospect I have not changed much. And one episode is that I have known several Japanese photographers. One was a Clarence Arai, and there were about three or four. . . . George, what's his name?

ALAN LAU: Uchida?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. Originally the owner of the Bush Hotel. He passed away.

ALAN LAU: I can find out.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. And there were about three or four people. It's a kind of an informal Japanese camera club.

ALAN LAU: Is that the one that Mr. [Yoshio—Ed.] Noma was in charge of, or not?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, there was no one in charge. No, I was just starting out, and it was before, even before I went to work for Mr. Yang. And one person in particular, he was telling me, "Please don't photograph only the trees!" [laughter] But I was obsessed by trees and tree forms and simple forms of the barks and branches of a tree. And I was doing that and all these years I've been doing that! [laughs]

ALAN LAU: Yeah, you were really interested in nature's forms,

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, right, yeah.

ALAN LAU: Close up or. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Exactly.

ALAN LAU: So before this, before the mid-fifties, did you have a camera before that in China or Korea?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: In Shanghai I had a camera. And I was very. . . . At the time—it was a very short period, about six months or something like that—I was very much taken by photography. And so I was doing enlargement and developing, printing, and things like that in my, her [Mineko's—Ed.] kitchen. [chuckles]

ALAN LAU: That was during the war, I guess?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, during the war. Our first son, prematurely born, and he died, and that was the time that I quit, when he died, and quit photography.

ALAN LAU: So that was, so you already had an appreciation and an interest in photography while you were there.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right. Well, and the lure to the graphic arts started when I was really very young, and under the influence of my eldest brother, who passed away, age of about 23 or 24. But he was what they today call the renaissance man. He never took any special training from any other, but was all self-taught. He was a painter, a pianist and composer, and a poet. He did just about everything and excelled in everything that he picked up. And so I was very much influenced by him, and because he was excellent at painter, I also followed him in the, was under his influence also. I was interested in music, too. So I had, you know, whether I would become a painter or a singer, and I had a struggle within myself.

ALAN LAU: So you were doing artwork all throughout your youth to. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right. Yes, from a very early age.

KAZUKO NAKANE: Do you mind if I can ask your brother's name?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: John.

ALAN LAU: And he died in Korea?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, he drowned.

ALAN LAU: Uh huh. [pause] Well, after you finished your apprenticeship, did you get a job working in a laboratory, or. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, I was employed by Chroma Incorporated.

ALAN LAU: Chroma?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, Chroma.

ALAN LAU: Like chrome, c-h-r-o-m-a.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. It's one of the two laboratories, color laboratories, extant at the time in Seattle. And Chroma was more, well, it was catering to amateur needs, but also they established a professional department. And I was put in charge of the professional department, doing all the enlargements and the more complicated, esoteric demands of customers.

ALAN LAU: Was that just to make money or did you learn a lot?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh, well, learning is by experience, you know. During four years I worked there—let me see, '57, '58, '59, '60, four years, I worked there—I might have printed a million different negatives.

ALAN LAU: [chuckles in awe] Um hmm.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And those days they didn't have any mechanical helps like today, you know. Today there are machines to analyze and it just. . . . You don't have to do it; all you have to do is just push buttons. Those days I had to. . . .

ALAN LAU: So you really had to have a sharp eye.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah. . . .analyze the negative and determine what filtration I should use, and without any densitometers or anything, just in the eyeballing. And so that was a tremendous learning process; I was put into that situation. But it was so demanding, the self-analysis was so demanding, that I learned a great deal, and even today I don't use any of those color densitometers or things like that.

ALAN LAU: You can do it with the naked eye.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right.

ALAN LAU: And were you taking pictures in your own free time at this time?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah.

ALAN LAU: Going out, driving out?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. Weekends I would go out and photograph for myself. And then I joined for very briefly Seattle Photographic Society, but somehow I fell apart from Mr. Yang. Yang became kind of jealous of my. . . .

ALAN LAU: Progress.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . progress. To him I was progressing too fast.

ALAN LAU: He was the leader of the Seattle Photographic Society?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yes.

ALAN LAU: So you had to be a loner, then?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. And the first year I joined, I was winning all the prizes.

ALAN LAU: Were you sending your work out to the different competitions they had?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, just like now, I'm very reluctant of sending it out all over, and the main job of all these camera club members, they circulate all over, the same pictures. And some of them they very proudly show it was accepted by this and that and a dozen different places. But I never did that. And I was accepted by. . . . Then it was annual photographic society shows. And the first year I was accepted, three pictures, black and white.

ALAN LAU: In Seattle?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

KAZUKO NAKANE: This International Photo show, or something like that?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, something like that.

ALAN LAU: At the Seattle Art Museum?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, Seattle Art Museum.

ALAN LAU: Okay, so was that one of your first public viewing, public exhibitions of your work?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, right, yes.

ALAN LAU: And did they then buy the photos for their collection?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes. I think the purchase prize was, say, something like the first prize or second prize. . . .

ALAN LAU: They buy the photo?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, yeah, the museum bought the picture, and I think they are in their collection now. But mine was not that, you know. I didn't win any special prize or anything like that. But I was accepted, and being accepted and being exhibited is enough reward.

ALAN LAU: Did that help your confidence, or did you already have enough confidence?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, I always had a confidence in myself. And I remember when I first started with Northwest Airlines there were another fellow—Oriental fellow, Cal Lew, a Chinese fellow—and he and I. . . . And there was a Japanese fellow, and the three of us were working, employed at the same time. Cal Lew and I got interested, and we bought the identical cameras. And he was just a Sunday photographer, just a snapshotter. I remember today, even today, that I said, "I'm not just going to photograph my family, or Mount Rainier, or something like that. I'm going to be a more important photographer." [chuckling] And I wonder if Cal Lew remembers that, because I haven't seen him for about thirty years now. But I remember that I had a sort of a vision toward my photographic future. I knew I was going to be something.

ALAN LAU: Is The Olympic Rain Forest, the book with Ruth Kirk, the first published. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Published [work].

ALAN LAU: . . . photographs you had in a book?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, yes. That was 1966 after I quit Chroma. And then in 1961, I went to University of Washington Medical School.

ALAN LAU: And you became a lab photographer for them?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, it was a kind of a unique position. And I knew that I had to be held more responsible. I had to get more responsible position than working in a laboratory.

ALAN LAU: Um hmm.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Although it was a responsible [position—Ed.] as a professional department manager, it didn't satisfy me, because I was catering to the different clients, and always the motivation was in making profit for the company, which I didn't like.

ALAN LAU: Yeah.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And so I was thinking, if I were to make a living out of photography, what should I do? I didn't want to do commercial photography. And through photography if I were to contribute towards humanity, probably medical photography is the one. So I had a couple of friends at the medical school photography department. Roy Hayashi was the name of the guy who was one of the responsible person at the photography department there. And I went to ask him if he knew any department [that—Ed.] was in need of a photographer, and he said he just happened to hear that [the] pathology department was thinking of hiring a photographer. I didn't know who was in the pathology department. I looked up the directory and found out Dr. Benditt, Earl Benditt, who was the chairman of the department. So I just called him, and whether I could have an appointment with him. He said, "All right," a certain date, and so I went with a portfolio of photographs—I have it somewhere today.

ALAN LAU: You still kept the original?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. I made a little booklet of all different types of photography that I was capable of doing, and I showed it to him, plus some of the major photography that I already did, and the vivid color prints, eight by tens, and he was very much taken. And he immediately called his next in charge. David Lagunoff was his assistant. They both came in and took a look at my portfolio, and. . . .

ALAN LAU: . . . said, "You're hired."

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, asked me when I can start. So I said, "Well, I can start just about any time." And so I think it was April 3rd or 4th was the first day that I went to work for. . . .

ALAN LAU: In nineteen. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: 1961.

ALAN LAU: Could you tell us a little about what the job entailed?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, the reason they wanted the photographer was [the] pathology department was one of the two departments in the medical school started using an electron microscope. And they would photograph through this electron microscope hundreds of pictures every week, and they had to see the results.

ALAN LAU: Right away.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right away. So until then they were sending it out to a medical photography department. The quality and the time consumed was not to their liking, so they wanted to have their own photographer. So when I came in, just the right time, and so I was put into work. . . .

ALAN LAU: Right away.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, right away. And I learned about electron microscopy. And also I borrowed several books on anatomy and pathology, and started learning what it was all about, you know. I didn't know what pathology. . . .

ALAN LAU: How long did it take for you to pick up the. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, it didn't take too much time. But the biggest problem was that they were just playing with the idea of having their own photography department, and someone come in, take care of all their needs, but they didn't have any equipment.

ALAN LAU: Oh, with no budget to. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: So we. . . . Well, they had plenty of budget. Money was no object.

ALAN LAU: No object!

MINEKO NAMKUNG: It's so funny! This is off [the] record, but somehow [on the end of] sometime, lots of money left, and some of the, all different doctors come, "Joe! You want to buy something?" "Joe! You want to buy something?" [This and following comments have been left in the transcript because they are not detrimental to an individual—Ed.]

ALAN LAU: Shocking.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: At the end of the fiscal year, you know.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: So, "I need a freezer." So his room was the best room! [all chuckle] Everything they buy for him.

ALAN LAU: Oh, where they have leftover cash.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh yeah, they had to use up. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Because otherwise it was gone, you know, so they have to use.

ALAN LAU: So it sounds like you had a pretty nice setup.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, first I brought all my equipment—my enlarger and my lenses, camera, and everything, and we started that way. It provided me a room, so we set it up. And then within two years, they made me a large two-room laboratory and my office, and so I designed, and we had the sink, stainless steel sink, fabricated by the medical school sheet metal shop, and put in just about [the—Ed.] most advanced equipment that I could put my hands on. So that's how I started. At times there would be a flux of work and I would work day and night, and sometimes there wouldn't be any work, three or four days, and. . . .

ALAN LAU: And you can go. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . and I, and that's the way I could do my own photography. But then later the chairman, Benditt. . . . Dr. Benditt was very conversant in art. He loved music and paintings and all the arts, and his wife is also very much in the arts.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: She's still art commissioner.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, she's, probably she's still the Seattle Art Commission's commissioner, one of the commissioners.

ALAN LAU: What's her name? How do you spell the name?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Benditt, B-e-n-d-i-t-t. Marcella Benditt.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: They have one of the best ceramic. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . collections in town.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Modern.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And so we not only, you know, boss and employee, but we became very good friends. We would be invited to their home, many, many times, and they would come to our home and have parties and so forth. And they appreciated my work very much. So he would let me go whenever I need to go. And about 1963 Ruth Kirk brought up the idea of doing a book together on the Olympic rain forest. So I spent about three years preparing, and I would take off anytime to the Olympic Peninsula. [chuckling]

ALAN LAU: Sounds like an ideal working situation.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, right, and as long as I. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, but when he work his night, he work, they don't complain at all.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Anytime, you know, I have my laboratory and my office, I can go in and work anytime. Sometimes I [would] work until three o'clock in the morning when there is need that I had to finish the work for them.

ALAN LAU: As long as you get the job done.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: So as long as I meet their demands, I could get away anytime.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Also medical school, everybody working midnight to morning.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: The environment was right for my growing up.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Wonderful. All the doctors so understanding.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: They were patronizing me, and so it was a very happy twenty years that I worked.

ALAN LAU: So you could really have time to develop your own photography career at the same time?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah.

ALAN LAU: How did you prepare for the rain forest job, as far as what you decided to shoot and how you approached the. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, we had understanding between Ruth and me that I would go out and photograph whatever I liked to, and I photographed many, many, many pictures. And then I would make all the work prints, and then we'd sit down and decide what to use, and they would make suggestions as to which direction we should go, and so forth.

ALAN LAU: She was writing the text, right?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. But also she photographed quite a bit herself, too. You see, I was not really very much interested in wildlife—the birds and animals and other creatures. I was more of an inanimate subjects. . . .

ALAN LAU: Forms, nature's forms.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Forms, yeah, right. And I had been using four by five camera, and it is not very conducive to photographing this wildlife movement.

ALAN LAU: How was that book received?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: It was received, I think they printed it about four times.

KAZUKO NAKANE: Oh, nice!

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, and it was [a] very popular book.

ALAN LAU: So it gave your work a lot of exposure.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. And as soon as I finished that work, University [of Washington—Ed.] Press signed me to do a lot of their books. The second book I did was art of the Kwakiutl Indians. I worked on that for about a year. I commuted to British Columbia, University of British Columbia Museum and photograph. . . .

ALAN LAU: Beautiful collection. So as each publication came out, you got more offers for freelance work. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right.

ALAN LAU: . . . and people saw your work and wanted you to do more?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. After that, I was kind of a specialist in artbook illustrator, in color. Not so much black and white, although I did black and white too. I did an African mask book. Anyway I probably worked on about a dozen art books.

ALAN LAU: From about the 1960s through the seventies?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah.

ALAN LAU: And this whole time you also were doing your own freelance work, going out and shooting.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Exactly, so I was covering three different fields of photography: medical photography, creative photography, and illustrator for art books.

ALAN LAU: What do you look for when you go out on a shoot for your own creative work? What to you makes a good photograph?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, I think one has to have an open mind, not preconceived idea of photographing this or that, an open mind so that you can respond to what you see and what you find. The most enjoyment I get out of it is the ordinary thing, that people wouldn't pay any attention to, like roadside weeds. And people wouldn't pay any attention, there is the beauty. But I find very often there is a beauty in the lowly humble clumps of, or group of plants, and weeds, and things like that. I think that is the essence or a component of a great nature. And microcosm is a representative of macrocosm, it seems. And more and more I, well, I don't dislike, but avoid photographing the recognizable—epic or heroic scenery and things like that.

ALAN LAU: So do you find yourself squinting down to the ground looking at one tuft of moss. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah.

ALAN LAU: . . . or looking at one section of bark on a tree?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes. Exactly, right.

KAZUKO NAKANE: I just wondered that your photograph look like a painting. Then it just make me wonder that, [if—Ed.] you were originally very interested in painting itself, and what kind of influence from painting that you're getting.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, you know, you find the accord with a painter's viewpoint—for instance, Mark Tobey. I was photographing at Deer Park in Olympic National Park. Deer Park is a large area, and there is a mountain called Blue Mountain. And one morning I was walking, and there were groups of rocks sticking out of this tundra-like feature. And I was looking around, and there was a rock about twelve feet high, and on one side there were white quartz running like Mark Tobey's white painting, and then there were reddish-orange lichens embedded or growing. And I thought, "Well, gee, there is a Mark Tobey!" I was not looking for Mark Tobey's painting, but there was something that I often saw in Mark Tobey's painting. [chuckles]

ALAN LAU: Well, I always thought that nature offers more abstract forms than any artist could ever think about.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Right, exactly. It's so beautiful.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Exactly, yeah.

ALAN LAU: There's nothing that you see in an abstract painting that hasn't been done by nature already.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: And it's such a vast area, with just endless subject, if you go there. You could stay forever!

MINEKO NAMKUNG: _____ [rock] is so beautiful. If you carefully watched it.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: A few years I was teaching the photography workshops, and sometimes I assign a group of pupils and tell them, "You just draw ten-foot circumference around you, and photograph. Don't move out. Within ten feet. You find something to photograph. And it was quite successful.

ALAN LAU: Do you take a long time to set up your shots, and do you take a lot of shots before you get the one you like?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I spend a lot of time. Oftentimes I make a scouting trip, you know, hiking for instance, going up a trail to a certain point. I usually leave my camera equipment behind, and hike and scout and come back, and if it's worthwhile, then take my camera up, and spend a long time. . . .

ALAN LAU: Setting up the shot.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . adjusting, setting up, digesting or looking at it, and from different angles, and distance and so forth. And finally when I find something. . . . There always has to be a unifying and a kinetic force. Which means the rhythm. And in musical terms, melodic lines. And melodic lines more like polyphonic, Bach, for instance. Bach, Handel, and Mozart. Linear structures. And then its juxtaposition, its counterbalancing, which is called counterpoint in musical terms. And I find almost every time when I see something, I always see melodic lines, and counterbalancing forces, and weight, and harmony. And that becomes the skeletal form of my

photographs. So my photographs are always, could be interpreted through musical forms.

ALAN LAU: And then you also make sure that it has a strong composition?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Exactly.

ALAN LAU: And frame it so that it has this certain focus and a balance to it?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes. Right, right.

ALAN LAU: And an interest, of course.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Also [inaudible]. There's another [lesson] in that. [inaudible]. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Film.

ALAN LAU: Film? Oh, yeah.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: So he wait a long time for some condition. Sometimes he wait eight hours for one shoot.

ALAN LAU: For the light, or the. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, well, sometimes, there is. . . . You know, photographing, the biggest enemies are wind, breeze. And you'd like to capture something and the leaves are moving and dancing, and sometimes you have to photograph a certain thing so you have to wait hours and hours, and just watching and watching, the moment where even on a breezy day, there's a certain moment that everything stops, and you wait for that. And in order to wait, you have to have a tremendous amount of patience and concentration.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Sometimes in the water he's waiting. [chuckles] Crazy!

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: [laughs]

ALAN LAU: Does nature ever surprise you when you scout a position, and you see the thing that you want to shoot, and then you bring your equipment all the way up there and it's changed?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh yes. The problem is when you see something, if it is possible, you have to photograph right away. For instance, when you are going to a certain destination in your car, and you see something that is very attractive, very enticing, but because of the time and the circumstances you keep going, hoping that when you come back, on your way back, it will still be there, but about 90 percent of the time it is not there any more. So unless you capture at the moment, you lose it.

ALAN LAU: So you always stop now?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh, I try. [laughs] You always have to balance all your priorities, and time element. When you stop and try to photograph, the fastest you can finish it is about thirty minutes, and oftentimes it takes more than that. And so unless you have plenty of time, [if your—Ed.] priority is not there but in other place, you lose a lot of things.

ALAN LAU: Do you sometimes have to fight with yourself and try to resist taking things that are obviously seductively beautiful?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

Tape 1, side B

ALAN LAU: You were saying that one of the art of photographing is to give up and not to take pictures of everything you see.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. Well, no, sometimes you walk around and spend half a day or whole day, and you don't really see something that's compelling. And then this evening I have to go back home. And so you try to photograph something which is not really compelling, then it's a waste of film, and all your attendant expense and all that. So when you are not really completely satisfied with what you see, you don't photograph. And I usually don't photograph, and I feel that I had a good time. I was sleeping outside, and get away from work, and had a good recreation, so I just don't be sorry for myself. And even if I don't get any good pictures, that's okay. I just don't photograph anything that is not convincing.

ALAN LAU: How would you describe “compelling” as far as your vision of a strong photograph?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, it may sound corny, but there is a certain amount of communication, empathy, with the things that I photograph. Almost as if it is talking to you. One time I was photographing. It was a very cold day, in Snoqualmie Pass, and I thought that I got everything that I wanted, and [was—Ed.] walking back to my car. And I just feel like something was pulling myself. So I looked up and there was a fantastic picture of these icicles. And such a thing I cannot explain why I heard something calling as if it was calling me: “Please photograph me.” So there is the moments that you have a sort of a communication or communion with the things.

ALAN LAU: With nature.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

ALAN LAU: Do you think your philosophy and your empathy for nature is influenced from your Oriental background, your Asian background? Or is that too stereotypical?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, not really. It’s like Zen. And Haiku is another element of my photographs, just like music. Zen is not something esoteric. It has to be a very common thing that happens every day, but it has a very, very deep meaning. It depends on how you receive it, and the attitude in yourself. It opens to you. And it doesn’t have to be extraordinary thing, earthshaking things, but just everyday, like eating rice, and drinking tea, and things like that, but there is a great meaning.

ALAN LAU: Maybe I should ask you about the kind of equipment that you use and what you specifically need for the kind of shoots that you do.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, from the very beginning I had a vision that I was not going to abandon my musical career. I was very much interested in pursuing musicology, and ethnomusicology study. Always I thought that it was very inadequate; all those publications so far, the illustrations of musical instruments left very much to be desired. I wanted to do a real fine photographic representation of musical instruments. And in order to do that, I had to have a large-format camera. And so, although I was using a Rolleiflex and a Canon 35-millimeter camera, I thought I must have a four by five view camera. It was realized back in 1957. A good friend of mine, Japanese gentleman, sent me I think about five hundred dollars out of the blue, “Please use this money to provide equipment or whatever you need to pursue your photographing future.” So I was doing a lot of research as to what equipment to buy. And at the time the two foremost makers in the world, one was Linhof, the other was Sinar. Linhof was made in West Germany, and Sinar was made in Switzerland. And through a lot of studying, written material, and so forth, I came to conclusion that Sinar is the better equipment. And I think I was the first, very first one to buy a Sinar camera at the time in Seattle. It was when I was working for Chroma, and Chroma had a special relationship with a camera importer. And I’ve forgotten the name of the company, and it still is doing the same thing, but the management at Chroma made arrangements so I could get it for discount, wholesale price. So at the time I think about five hundred dollars, the money I was given by this Japanese gentleman, and I bought just about everything! That. . . .

ALAN LAU: The whole setup.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . that whole setup. It was called the Sinar Expert. And I still use the same camera today, and in pristine condition. I take care of my equipment very well, and it looks just like the day I bought it.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: You had a Linhof too, didn’t you?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, I had a Linhof, and, but still the Sinar is the one I’m still using.

ALAN LAU: So do you think that you originally bought it because you had in your mind that you wanted to do this precision work of musical instruments?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yes.

ALAN LAU: Then after you got it, it seemed to fit into the format. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, exactly.

ALAN LAU: . . . of the forms of nature you wanted to shoot as well?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Forms, that’s right.

ALAN LAU: I see. Can you tell us some of the places that you have gone to take pictures? And what reasons do you use to choose these places that you go around the world or around the state?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, I first started in amateurish attempt in Mount Rainier National Park, and then later because of the publication of the rain forest book, I spent a lot of time in Olympic National Park. And then I was interested in traveling around, and I discovered that Eastern Washington was vastly different from Western Washington, and I was very much attracted by the different types of vegetation and the rock formation and so on and so forth. So I've been going over to Eastern Washington quite regularly. I think I have just about covered the entire state from southeast corner to northeast corner, and southwest to northwest, and all over between.

ALAN LAU: And have you gone up to Alaska as well?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, I went to Alaska close to half a dozen times, and also Oregon, some parts of Idaho.

ALAN LAU: And you've gone to Asia, you've been to Nepal, Tibet?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, I went to China three times after. . . .

ALAN LAU: After Nixon? [chuckles]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: After Nixon, right, yeah.

KAZUKO NAKANE: I wonder, you accompany somebody?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: After the first trip, a number of my friends asked me to organize a tour, and lead them to different parts of China. And the first tour we covered, you know, Shanghai, Beijing, and then Xi'an, Chongqing, and came down the Yangtze River, and Wuhan, then Guilin, and came out through Hong Kong. So I incorporated the same route very much, but I extended over to inner Mongolia, and then to Xinjiang, Chinese Turkistan. And it was very successful. After that we went to Sichuan, Chongqing, and down the river and then Guilin, and so on.

ALAN LAU: Well, I guess it didn't hurt that you had lived in China during the war and you could speak Chinese.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. I lost my fluency in Chinese, but it was helpful. And it was amazing that everywhere you go there would be some people from Shanghai, and we had a real heck of a time talking in Shanghai dialect. [laughing] Third trip was, I didn't want to go to all these other places, and we concentrated on Yunnan Province, and went down to. . . . God, my memory is terrible. It's directly above Burma, north of Burma.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Hmong.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, and the Miao.

ALAN LAU: Miao, Mien. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, yeah. Dai people, Dai. That was Thailand. They call it Dai-zu, and they write exactly the same character as Thai. And then we went to Tibet, or Xizang. And usually they spend about four or five days in regular tours, but I made the arrangement to go to Gyangze and Xigaze. And felt very lucky that we have done that because it's very difficult to go there now.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: They were all anti-Chinese when they came back. All good friends. All very close friends with each other. They all left China _____, and sure enough, right after they got home, _____ riots. They really treat Tibetans like animals, the Chinese.

ALAN LAU: Yeah, I guess there's a lot of people in China who aren't too happy with the way the government is treating them.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

ALAN LAU: It's a wide area.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, I think so.

ALAN LAU: Over fifty nationalities, besides the Han.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. That's right, yeah.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: They were just treated like animals. Naturally, they don't take a bath, they so dirty, and trying to _____ their system. They don't want to go there, so they're beaten up and everything. They trying to destroy the culture.

KAZUKO NAKANE: When you go to like Rainier to take your beautiful pictures, you are accompanied by your wife sometimes but mostly you. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Mostly I go by myself.

ALAN LAU: It seems like you're happier shooting alone than when you're with a group.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, when you have other person you always have to worry about other person. When I go, eating or resting is secondary. I don't even think about it. Sometimes all day long I don't eat anything.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Don't eat, you know! I'm the big eater! [laughter] When am I gonna eat? When am I gonna eat? And like he's in the middle of the _____ and mosquito, so you have to keep move, otherwise you get million mosquito bites. He doesn't care, but I care!

ALAN LAU: You just stand still, waiting for that shot.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: [chuckles]

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Right, it's very difficult, yeah. And also you can't even sketch either, it's complete different thing.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: But she's excellent companion.

ALAN LAU: I hope so.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I don't think other people can stand me, but. . . .

ALAN LAU: Patience.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. She sits down and starts sketching, for herself, and she's a very fast drawer. So if I set up the camera and things like that and something is not very conducive and I quit, in about ten or fifteen minutes, she finishes quickly. Sometimes I spend an hour, two hours, and she keeps painting.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: [laughing] Really, no good.

ALAN LAU: She can do a complete painting instead of a quick sketch.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: So if I have to go with someone else, I would like to go with her, because she doesn't complain, except eating time. [laughs]

MINEKO NAMKUNG: I should just eat whenever I get hungry.

ALAN LAU: Just eat, just bring it.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Right, and just don't wait anymore. Used to be more like a Japanese style, I have to wait until he comes. No more, anytime, eat _____ he eats. [laughs]

ALAN LAU: How did the show at the Seattle Art Museum come about?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, do you know Paul Macapia?

ALAN LAU: Um hmm.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Paul and I are very close friends, from the days I was with the university. He was a medical photographer.

ALAN LAU: Oh, I see, before he went over to Seattle Art Museum. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. And he's much younger than I am, and he was just starting. He's a very humble person, and he considers me as his teacher. And we'd go out and photograph, and I introduced him to all the places that I'd been to, and I'd give him advice. When he went to work for Seattle Art Museum, we still kept luncheon appointments and get together once in a while. And on his suggestion, he said, "You should have a show at Seattle Art Museum." And he arranged a meeting with Willis. . . .

ALAN LAU: Willis Woods?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Cowles.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. Willis Woods was the. . . . Charlie Cowles was the curator of modern art.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: He's from New York.

ALAN LAU: Oh, yeah, he has his gallery in New York.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, yeah, _____ Gallery.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Also his own art book.

ALAN LAU: Art magazine.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Arts magazine.

ALAN LAU: Oh, the new one, that started up?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: I don't know which one.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Anyway, I showed him some of my prints, 20 by 24. And my idea always had been that photography should be considered as one of the major arts, not just paintings or sculpture as major the art, but photography is also a major art. And in order to compete with the so-called regular oil paintings and watercolor, it has to be about equal size. . . .

ALAN LAU: Same scale.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, same scale, so that side by side it won't be just because photography is small, that. . . .

ALAN LAU: It can be ignored.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right. So I always wanted to make it largest print I can make. And at the time I was capable of making was 20 by 24 the largest. And so I had several prints of that size, and he was very much taken by my photographs, and suggested that I should have a one-man show. That was in 1976 that we discussed about it, and he tried to put it in his schedule. And finally it was decided. He was going to do it in '77; there was no opening, and he thought it was most propitious to have it done at the time of the King Tut show.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: That was a very good time, because lots of people go there, so he got so many people attended.

ALAN LAU: So you got good exposure through that show.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah. It was shown two months, and then it was extended for another month, for three months.

ALAN LAU: Did that lead to increased sales, increased interest in your work?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. It definitely opened up. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: All over the United States.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Not Seattle. . . .

ALAN LAU: Did that show tour?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, you know, Charlie had a grandiose idea of sending it throughout the country, and I think he made the mistake in charging too much. I think he was charging \$5000 or something like that. [chuckles] I don't know how many times it was out on tour, but not very wide.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Also, they don't push anymore. This new museum is not interested at all.

ALAN LAU: In photography?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Photography, but different kind, you know.

ALAN LAU: I know they have a photography curator now.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Now, yes.

ALAN LAU: That was recent, in the last few years.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: But it's completely different now. Different kinds of things.

ALAN LAU: I get the feeling that you're really more interested in the act of photography rather than the exhibition of the work afterwards, is that correct?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. Well, I don't photograph to sell, I don't photograph to exhibit, I don't photograph to publish. I just photograph because I have to photograph. And photographing—as well as processing and printing—is very important to me. Any photographer who is worth his salt must be able to do the entire process by himself, not only being able to but try to do it, and I just don't like the attitude of some, or many photographers, saying proudly that all they do is just the photograph and have someone else to do the print.

ALAN LAU: Their printing.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: This is the same as creative print. You have to print yourself. . . .

ALAN LAU: The whole process.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. So I get tremendous elation and enjoyment out of the spending [time in the—Ed.] darkroom. And the ratio is one to maybe five, one part of photographing and five parts of the printing. But I think I don't have to be very prolific, and although I like to go out and photograph. . . . They made it so that I can print the work.

ALAN LAU: It seems like you could have, if you had wanted to, given your career more exposure by selling more, showing more, showing in several galleries on the East Coast, West Coast, but it seems like that's not your primary interest.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. Commercial connotation is somehow embedded in my psyche so deeply as the Oriental way of thinking, you know, anything commercial is really not. . . . [laughs]

ALAN LAU: Not good.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: But since then people's _____, he was the one sold photography. Till then, they don't think about buying photography, in this town. So have to push up the same level you should think of an art object. So he has to work very hard from that point. And, for instance, like in San Francisco he had a show. Even San Francisco, they never sold, so when he had a one-man show, he was kind of mad because it doesn't put the price or anything. And he told him, you know, she told him, "No one buys something like that." He almost folded and bring back, you know. My son, you know, _____, "You should see the show! He almost couldn't bring the. . . .!"

ALAN LAU: Didn't like your attitude.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: [Something] about, even San Francisco, [then] the Frankenstein, the critics, came here. He was complaining. He sold, never sold a picture in San Francisco. Same for Seattle. We, we were _____. I teased him that way, you know. So that all over United States is same way; photography is not _____ sale.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I was the first one to sell regularly. And photography, on the same level as in collections of corporations, like then Rainier National Bank—it's Security Pacific Bank now.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Sheraton, all over.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: A lot of the corporations who started collections in photography, I was the very first one to induce them to buy.

ALAN LAU: It seems like the scale on which you work and your philosophy that photographs should be like painting goes against the grain of a lot of contemporary photography.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

ALAN LAU: The documentation aspects, and. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, documentation and manipulations. . . .

ALAN LAU: What photographers did you admire, or do you admire?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Edward Weston is still my idol, and Paul Strand, Edward Weston. Ansel Adams as a person and as a teacher, not so much as a creative photographer on the same level as Edward Weston. But Ansel

Adams, I was lucky enough to be able get acquainted with him. Edward Weston, I started a little too late in photography to be able to know him and get acquainted with him.

ALAN LAU: This summer we saw on NHK [Nippon Hoso Kyokai, Japan Broadcasting Corporation—Ed.], they had a three-part program on the history of photography. And they showed early prints from the J. Paul Getty collection in southern California, starting with the British photographers, and the French, and working their way up to [Alfred—Ed.] Stieglitz and then they had Eikoh Hosoe and one more Japanese photographer discuss each print.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Is that right?

ALAN LAU: It was an interesting program.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's NHK.

ALAN LAU: NHK, on their educational channel. In your catalog you mentioned Jack McLauchlan as an influence. Can you tell us something about him?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Jack McLauchlan was. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: President of. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . of Seattle Photography Society.

ALAN LAU: After [Chao-Chen—Ed.] Yang?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I don't know whether Yang was a president. He was a important person. He was not that political a person.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: He's a lawyer, is he?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, he's a lawyer. And, well, not influenced but I got acquainted with him, and he was very friendly toward me.

KAZUKO NAKANE: This make me wonder that, knowing how many artwork you have at home, and how artistic you are, and make me feel like you have a lot of acquaintance with artists.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, we were very fortunate, ever since we came to Seattle, the first person, artist we met was George Tsutakawa. And through him we met a lot of faculty in the School of Art, and also, through them, we met a lot outside the art school, people such as Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan, Guy Anderson, and. . . .

ALAN LAU: Paul Horiuchi. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Paul Horiuchi, yeah.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah. [laughing] I didn't know Guy Anderson was a artist. He came out of this very dirty housing project house, and he loved to drink, I think. Afterward I heard this is a famous, good painter! [laughs] I thought he was just a dirty drunkard! [all laugh]

ALAN LAU: Looks are deceiving, you know.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, very nice person. We had a wonderful acquaintance.

KAZUKO NAKANE: Mr. Guy Anderson writes a lot of philosophical kind of very, you know, creates his own space.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Right, yes.

KAZUKO NAKANE: And so when he speak to you, he speaks like that?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: No, nothing. Nothing, no, no.

ALAN LAU: Very casual.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: We don't discuss those things.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . we don't discuss too serious things. Only Mark, Mark Tobey. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, we all get together and sketching. Over they have the pen and. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And we would get together quite regularly—Paul Horiuchi, George Tsutakawa, Mark Tobey, and us—and I don't know how many times we would have party here. And after the party, we would have a second session. Everyone bring art and. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Sketch each other face! [laughs]

ALAN LAU: Oh, yeah, John Matsudaira has a sketch. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: John Matsudaira, yes.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: I sketched Mark's face, I think, something, and then John draws Selig, Otto. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

ALAN LAU: Oh, Otto Seligman.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Otto Seligman, yeah.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Actually nothing to with artists, just fun.

ALAN LAU: It seems like from talking to the artists around here, they just had fun together, and they didn't talk about art. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Not that much.

ALAN LAU: . . . they talked about tennis, or eating. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, but Mark is talking; his each word is so important. I wish I could have kept all the record like you did. So the one guy, who was the artist, he kept a quite a. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Wesley Wehr. . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, that's right. He could publish those things. It's so wonderful words.

ALAN LAU: Wesley Wehr published a book?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No.

ALAN LAU: Oh, you mean the other guy. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Wesley Wehr, Wes Wehr. You know him.

ALAN LAU: Yeah. I know of him.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: He published in that Maxine Gray's.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: But he published a book, too, out of his, short book. He kept a whole record like you did today. It's just so important, everything. His politics, everything; music, everything.

ALAN LAU: Is that in some publication, then?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I don't think it came out in book form.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: You could ask Wes Wehr. Maybe somewhere, they have. It's really good teaching, very pure artist, wonderful, yeah.

KAZUKO NAKANE: He's a knowledgeable man, too, then.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Oh, he's [Tobey—Ed.] handsome. And then finally—we didn't have too much punch or something—he stopped dancing here. And also he's, play piano, and Joh at that time was still singing, so he wants to accompany. He's such a talented person, so in case he's not a painter, maybe he become a wonderful musician, or actor, or whatever. Very talented, wonderful person.

ALAN LAU: Can you tell us a little bit about the different artists you met, their personalities?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, you know, most of the time, Paul Horiuchi and George Tsutakawa and us, the three families, would get together, and. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: And go to beach [laughs].

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . sometimes—once a week or even twice a week, and weekends—we would go out and picnic together, and. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: In the summertime, ten day we camped together all the time.

ALAN LAU: So you'd sketch a lot?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Oh, yes! And the end of this ten days camping, we'd have to have own show on the beach, and at Shi Shi Beach, and no humans there, so the one-man show, two-man show, right up on the whole beach. [laughter]

ALAN LAU: That was like in the fifties and sixties?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Right, something like that.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

ALAN LAU: Well, it seems like now everybody's just kind of doing their own thing.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

ALAN LAU: Why is it kind of different times.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: I don't know. Well, Paul and George never talk again, and even don't say hello. [laughs]

ALAN LAU: Is it just the times, or just everybody got busy, or. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Because everybody got famous, that's why!

ALAN LAU: I don't know.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, those good old days, we were all poor.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Exactly. Exactly.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: You know, we are, we didn't have to pretend that we had money, or dress up and. . . .

ALAN LAU: Reputation and. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . and we were not that important. And once one gets a little fame and becomes an important personage, and then it somehow works into jealousy and things like that. And a prime example is perhaps the Tsutakawas and the Horiuchis. I don't know how they fell apart, but Tsutakawa, George, was in very secure position as a professor of art at the university. He really never had difficult time. When we first met, he was really very poor, staying at [_____]—Ed.] Moriguchi. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Behind the Moriguchi house!

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

ALAN LAU: Oh, yeah!

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: This was Moriguchi's small house.

ALAN LAU: Yeah. In an alley?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: We visit _____. Where is George house? "No, I don't think that professor George is there." "No, George is there," [Kimoko] said. "He's _____ that house!" Something like that, you know.

ALAN LAU: Yeah, I think Glen Alps said he remembers being invited to their house, and it was in some little alley, a small little place.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right. A small house. It's torn down, but he was, you know, steadily advancing. First, when we first him, he was an instructor, and became assistant professor, and associate professor, and became full professor. And he was doing quite well, and because we were all poor, we were sharing everything, and Paul was having a real hard time.

ALAN LAU: I think he really had to struggle. He had his little antique shop, and he had his. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, before the antique shop, he was. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: No paper to paint.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . he was, you know, just a laborer, and working, and he had a little body shop, automobile body shop, on Twelfth Avenue, and. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: He had an accident, and break the arm.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And he was a very good body shop man.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Of course! He's a painter!

MINEKO NAMKUNG: He match the color, that ____ [way].

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Match the color is his specialty.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: But one day he was fixing his sign, shop sign, and he fell and he broke his. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, three or four months in a cast.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And many months he was inactive, and so Bernie [Bernadette Horiuchi—Ed.]. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: That's why ____ went to ____.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . yeah, started working. And then after that they folded up, and then they started the Tozai, or East West. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: . . . antique shop.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . antique shop, store.

ALAN LAU: Was that the same time you started Hanga Gallery?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, we started earlier.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Hanga? Oh, yeah.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: We started our gallery earlier.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Fifty something. Fifty-seven?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, '57 till about '62.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Exactly five years.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Exactly five years. December third, five o'clock, we close.

ALAN LAU: So, it seemed like the early sixties was quite a peak as far as interest in things Japanese, at that time?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, it was starting. The [samano], which is a lantern, was featured in Life magazine and things like that. [When reading the final copy, JN added the following here: "This makes little sense. I may have to listen to the tape."]

MINEKO NAMKUNG: There's a Northwest Annual in the museum. There's no like it today. It was such a exciting for artists. There's Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, everything there. It's just all competition. So really exciting for ones, and they all bring in.

ALAN LAU: Their best work.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Oh, best work, and then always jury from somewhere else. So it's very fair, too. It was a very exciting time.

KAZUKO NAKANE: Also that, '62, there was a fair.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes. . . .

KAZUKO NAKANE: ____ bring out the ____ ____.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, World Fair.

ALAN LAU: Did that make Seattle a bigger city, from a small town?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah, it really made a quantum leap at the time. It's known throughout the world, and a lot of people came to visit.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: It was quite something for us, you know. We have to pay each time, someone to come and to take there. Each time maybe fifteen dollars, something like that.

ALAN LAU: Oh, you had to take a lot of people there. [chuckles]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, we have [picture, painter] of all the cities of that way, to make it, that way. That's why we have an Opera House, because we didn't know how we were gonna place the performing music. That was a skating rink place, isn't it?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, no, arena, it's ice arena.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Ice arena, or something like that.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: But it is, Opera was, used to be called the Seattle Municipal Building.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Oh, yeah. [chuckles]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Municipal Court.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: One time Joh has to sing on the stage. How much he make for ____, I couldn't hear anything, you know, so bad.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Acoustics were so bad that I was singing there, and they said that I had to use microphone, and I said, "I refuse to use microphone." [chuckles]

MINEKO NAMKUNG: So that's how we have Opera House now.

ALAN LAU: Well, I think Seattle's going through growing pains, and trying, it's going through a gradual progression to a city.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Right, right.

KAZUKO NAKANE: And then after '62, was this gallery, private gallery starting.

Tape 2, side A

ALAN LAU: So, there were three galleries, this was in 1957?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: '57.

ALAN LAU: Seligman, Zoe Dusanne, and your gallery.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

ALAN LAU: And [Gordon—Ed.] Woodside had not started yet.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh, no, Woodside was a . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: No, no, no, Woodside came to my gallery all the time. He got the dirtiest and ____ ____ and _____. He was such a sneaky guy! [chuckles]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: He came to spy how we operate and what it takes to . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: And he always ask me, "Could I have a ____ painting?" or Frank Okada, to me a big problem. I have to call them to bring in, and then I [call this mister, called his sister], I called him, "How many ____ do we have?" Frank maybe come. "Hah! Thank you," and go out. I was so mad.

ALAN LAU: Oh, so he just wants to check the artist and see what he wants to carry and how to operate a gallery?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, yeah.

ALAN LAU: And then there was the Little Gallery in Frederick & Nelson at that time?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: That's much later, much later.

ALAN LAU: Much later? In the sixties.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Much later.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: I don't know. There's Woodside Gallery now, but didn't hear too much.

ALAN LAU: So you were pretty instrumental in introducing the print as an art form in Seattle.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Print was hard work! There's no different from J.C. Penney, Seattle ____ prints, or this prints, is no different. . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: People had the notion of print as a reproduction print. They didn't know what the prints are, and we wanted to. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: . . . educate people, you know.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Hanga, probably you know. Mubanhua, it's. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: . . . creative prints.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, print, the wood block print. And that's why we used the Hanga Gallery, Print Gallery.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Something like that, yeah.

ALAN LAU: So did you start out showing Japanese woodblock prints first?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Actually, no, we wanted to show everyone, but it's only the friends at that time were Japanese, but we, I did lots of local people like Ken Auvil.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Glen Alps. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: . . . silk screen maker and now he's retired but he was head of California. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: San Jose.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Very good silk screener [Auvil—Ed.]. He won many, many prizes nationally. Something like I did many one-man shows locally, whoever come out, but at that time only Glen Alps was the only one person teaching this study of ____.

ALAN LAU: Yeah, he told us that it was really hard for him to teach and show people that the print was an art form.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Print is this way. You also you have to make lots of demonstrations to show people. But only good thing is newspaper people is very cooperative. Always they give a half page explaining and so on. So in Ken's case, it's sold out the whole thing and ____ _____. Imagine, I had to [knock off] everything in a one-man show, didn't sell even one.

ALAN LAU: I wish I was around.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: [chuckles]

MINEKO NAMKUNG: So I purchased either one or two all the time, because I feel so sorry to send back. So that's why I have a collection of. . . .

ALAN LAU: Nice collection, yeah.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: . . . this many, is at that time only \$90, \$100, how many [dollars did I cut] now priceless.

ALAN LAU: Yeah. Well, there's no problem selling prints now.

ALAN LAU: I mean, Sam Francis is \$16,000 for a print now, we saw.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: And then eventually now, how many teaching university, and then, the another art

department, art school over there, Capitol Hill art school [Cornish—AL], has so many art department they're teaching. So now they start coming to my gallery, students coming to see prints. So now I have to educate them too! First thing I have to [say—Ed.], "Go back and wash the hands." You know, they have to have clean hands to see the prints. They have to have lithograph, woodcut, silkscreen, everything.

ALAN LAU: And have demonstrations for all of them.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Demonstrations all the time whenever the famous people come.

KAZUKO NAKANE: So that's where you train your artistic career?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Oh, myself?

KAZUKO NAKANE: Uh huh.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Sitting at home watching those same artists was a great deal to see. So I wasn't a printmaker or anything, but I loved prints.

ALAN LAU: Well, you always did your own art, didn't you? Painting and sketching?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: No, I wasn't artist.

ALAN LAU: Or just recently, in the sixties?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: No, it's my father was quite established in Japan.

ALAN LAU: That's right, we heard about it, yeah.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: So every day I'm living in an artist's family. So I watch and sketch. I'm been very lucky. I love painting but when _____ for Northwest area I was in there, I was just shocked. I never paint before. I was in there. One time I was. . . .

ALAN LAU: Well, when was the first time you got in the annual?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: I have, there is a record.

ALAN LAU: 1956 or '7?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Anyhow, it was the one of the most exciting, only eleven women in this whole area, the five state, and I was in there. So I was very shocked something like that happened. I guess, when did I send it in? Isn't it lucky? I wasn't a painter.

ALAN LAU: Well, that probably encouraged you to keep painting, when you got accepted.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, that and. . . .

ALAN LAU: Well, you had this show in Kiku Gallery, didn't you?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: No, Kiku Gallery is very large, nothing to do about my [artists' _____, art is area]. Just luck. She came and knocked on the door.

ALAN LAU: Oh, she just picked whatever you had.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Eight o'clock in the morning she came and knocked the door. Then she, Joh came up, she said, "I want your wife's painting." And so Joh said, "Who is that?" And he said, she said, "Some people want to buy your painting, so can I borrow?" I so I didn't know, said "Okay," or something like that, so she took a few, three or something, and went off. A small Volkswagen. And she sold and came back, "I want to have some more." Something like that, so I gave her two of them, sold and came back!

ALAN LAU: She paid you, didn't she? [chuckles]

MINEKO NAMKUNG: I don't know, but it was very funny. And then finally she said, "I want to have you a one-man show." So I said, "Wait a moment, I don't have any one-man show. If I have to work one-man show, I have to work something different away, because I wasn't painter for like that!"

ALAN LAU: One or the other.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Then, "That's too late. I printed already announcement." I was really mad by that time. But

too late. She send already, or something like that. So, you know, she gave me only two weeks, so I painted about twenty-seven of them, and she made a little show and sold in one day, sold out.

ALAN LAU: Wow.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: It was funny. She ____ about eighty—I don't know whether this was true or not—eighty names. She said, "Old people waiting for you have to paint some. That's it." Just quit acquaintance with her.

ALAN LAU: Oh, you don't want to be an art factory, huh?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Well, she's something like, no different from art or machine dyes or cosmetic ____.

ALAN LAU: Interior design.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Just sell like, like that.

ALAN LAU: Money. I heard that she was very good at selling.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: She's a sales lady. If you once get in, you cannot get out of those things, especially a man.

ALAN LAU: I remember when I first came to Seattle I went up to Kiku Gallery, up there, on Capitol Hill?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yes.

ALAN LAU: She had a lot of the best Asian-American artists from that time.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Well, see, that's what I say, that's one reason. She advertised whole thing. Another bad thing is like. . . . Who is that we mentioned the other day. . . . Maria Abrams. She get into her home, directly, because she's very a good friend, and so she came to my one-man show the preview day. Now she got already on the operations. She went to there, and she say, "I want to have a one-man show." Maria called me right away, "She came into my home and have a one-man show." I said, "Gosh, Crazy lady!" She's ____ ____ but she has already gallery, [Zigman] and everything. But she's not ashamed to do everything like that!

ALAN LAU: Not shy.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: No! "So you have to be carefully," I told Maria, something like that. So I said, "[Not—Ed.] any more," and to listen to all her story and gossip and everything, so that's it. Then, good thing she closed the gallery like that, isn't it?
[Interruption in taping]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: The first, very first photography gallery in Seattle was called the Infinity Gallery.

ALAN LAU: When did that open?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I think it was about '65 or so.

ALAN LAU: Who was the curator or the owner of that?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: The owner was Ross. . . . What was his first name? Very funny first name. Unusual. [Letcher Ross—Ed.]

ALAN LAU: Is he still around?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: He's working in the University of Washington somewhere, and I don't know whether he is still there or not.

ALAN LAU: Did you show at that gallery?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, well, when he first started, we all wanted to help him, and the first show we had was Northwest Sampler. And we invited all the then-active photographers. I remember inviting Harald Sund. You know Harald Sund?

ALAN LAU: No, I don't.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: He was a photographer for Life, and he did a lot of work for Life and Time publications.

ALAN LAU: Is he Chinese?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. Sund, S-u-n-d. I think he is also Norwegian or [extracting]. His father was living in West Seattle, and he was living with his father at the time, and I remember I called him and he was already quite well known, and a very reticent person. He said that he didn't want to exhibit his work. All he does was for magazines. So I never met him, the man, but his latest work is the Over Washington publication.

ALAN LAU: From a plane?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, from the airplane. He didn't do the video part, the video cassette, and the book is for [Washington State—Ed.] centennial.

ALAN LAU: So you have a lot of patterns of fields and mountains. . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right. He's a good photographer.

ALAN LAU: So did you eventually persuade him to show at the Infinity?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No.

ALAN LAU: That would've been a good drawing card, I guess.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah.

KAZUKO NAKANE: Can I ask you one question? When I was at one of the artist, he has a very nice tan, and he said he played tennis and I wonder if you do some sports.

ALAN LAU: Hiking.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, I'm not a sportsman, but I play badminton once every week.

KAZUKO NAKANE: Oh. With somebody?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, a friend of mine who used to live three doors from here. He's a medical doctor, a psychiatrist, and we still play together. And I used to play quite a bit, about three or four times a week, but his schedule doesn't allow it, so we play just once a week.

KAZUKO NAKANE: I must remember some other person.

KAZUKO NAKANE: Yeah, he had a very nice tan. This is a older gentleman.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, I'm not a sportsman, but I enjoy everything sports. You know, I am good spectator sportsman. I like to watch football games, basketball games. Not so much of baseball, I don't understand baseball.

ALAN LAU: I guess you wouldn't go with David [Ishii—Ed.] when he goes to the Mariner games.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. David is crazy. [laughs]

KAZUKO NAKANE: Do you still perform for singing?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, I don't.

KAZUKO NAKANE: Oh, you don't?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No.

ALAN LAU: So you've kind of given up that.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: It's too time consuming. Just like athlete, you know, you have to do it every day.

KAZUKO NAKANE: Oh, I see, so that if you are called, you have to prepare many months in advance.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh, yeah. Well, not many months in advance; it's just continuous training, just like any good athlete. Chris Evert, she would practice tennis every day, all year around, as long as she keeps on her professional career. Musicians same way. Pianists, they have to play six or seven hours every day. Voice, singers don't, can't do that, but they. . . .

ALAN LAU: They wear out their throats.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, right. But still you have to practice two, three hours every day.

ALAN LAU: Do you still go to opera?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. I don't like opera very well.

ALAN LAU: [chuckles] You like German lieder, I see.

KAZUKO NAKANE: You listen to music?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes, it's like. . . .

KAZUKO NAKANE: All the time?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, I like to listen to music almost any time of the day.

ALAN LAU: Mainly classical?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: All.

ALAN LAU: All classical. How did you get into Foster/White Gallery. Did he approach you? Did Richard White approach you, or did you approach them?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, that's my question, too, Joh. [laughter] When you gonna quit there?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I don't remember just exactly how.

ALAN LAU: At the time you got into the gallery, was it Don Foster and Richard White, or just Richard White?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, it's Don Foster.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: He's a nice person anyhow.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: The first time I showed it was the time I had the show. And I had an idea that the gallery is the place to sell the pictures, commercial gallery, that museum doesn't sell. Although museum sold quite a bit. So we had the show simultaneously.

ALAN LAU: Oh, the big show at SAM [Seattle Art Museum—Ed.], you also had a show at the gallery.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah. That's my first show with the Foster/White Gallery.

ALAN LAU: Different prints or the same prints?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I think it was smaller scale. Over at the at the art museum, it was close to. . . .

ALAN LAU: The big. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, the size was the same, but the. . . .

ALAN LAU: Oh, I see, the number of things.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, about ninety. . . . Do you have any other Korean artists you know?

ALAN LAU: Oh, you're the only one. I wish you could get me some names.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: One. . . . Yeah, there's one sculptor and painter [Hyongnam Ahn—JN]. He was born in Korea, but he went to. . . .

MINEKO NAMKUNG: He _____, but David says that's no good because he has to have _____ in [time]. He just arrived from Chicago, so. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, four years ago.

ALAN LAU: Oh, I see, very recently.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: That's what David told me.

ALAN LAU: Yeah, we're kind of going from the twentieth century to about the seventies.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: So maybe from now on he stay several years, then it's fine. He's a finest young sculptor.

ALAN LAU: Well, we could still take his name down.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: Yeah, he's very good in [discovery] already.

ALAN LAU: Does he have a studio in Pioneer Square?

MINEKO NAMKUNG: No, no. Nothing.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. He lives in Mukilteo.

ALAN LAU: Oh, Mukilteo.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

ALAN LAU: Kind of isolated.

MINEKO NAMKUNG: His parents are there. That's why he came here. ____ ____ in Chicago.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, he lived in, he went to school in Chicago and he did quite important public art, made good sculpture in Chicago.

ALAN LAU: What's his name?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Hyungnam—H-y-u-n-g-n-a-m—Ahm—A-h-m. I'll get the address for you.
[Food is served, and the rest of the recording is mainly social conversation—Ed.]

END OF INTERVIEW

Interview with Johsel Namkung
Conducted by David Takami
In Seattle, Washington
February 25, 1991

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Johsel Namkung on February 25, 1991. The interview took place in Seattle, Washington, and was conducted by David Takami for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Note: Although this is the second of two interviews, it is the first chronologically, covering the artist's family history and early years—Ed.]

Interview

Tape 1, Side A

DAVID TAKAMI: But maybe we could just start at the beginning, and just tell about where you were born and something about your childhood, and your parents, and background.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, it's very sketchy. I don't remember too much, except that I was born in 1919, in Kwangju, of Cholla Province, which is the southern tip of South Korea. And that, Kwangju has become very famous. There have been many civil revolts, or protests. Recently, it was one of the major events that brought Chun Doo Hwan—President Chun—down, and previously Syngman Ree and other political figures. And going back to 1919, the year I was born, in March—I was born April 24th—in March there was a big uprising against the Japanese occupation. For annexation of Korea. And Korea was annexed by Japan by force in 1910. So in about nine years, Korean people were all excited that they will be given the chance of becoming independent nation again. It was a time that, the time when the First World War was over, and President Wilson made a declaration that there was a self-determination of all of the nations that, which had been subject [to—Ed.] the domination by other colonial or other countries. And so Koreans, they thought their chance of becoming independent country, so that's how the uprisings started all over. But one memorable place was Kwangju. Anyway, I was born in April, one month after the uprising.

DAVID TAKAMI: Was that a large city, at the time?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Kwangju was about—let me see, one, two, three, four—oh, about fifth largest city in all Korea. And it's very difficult to tell you that at the time, up until 1945, when South Korea was divided or occupied, south of the 38th Parallel, by American occupation forces and above by Soviet Russia, and before that it was one country, and there was no difference. And even now, we feel that it's very difficult to reconcile with the idea that Korea is divided in two, North Korea and South Korea, because it was all one. So it was a fairly large city. And my father left Kwangju about 1921 or '22, to the United States, and went to do his postgraduate work at Princeton University. And I don't remember how long he stayed there, and he finished some courses, and then went down to West Virginia. And there is a theological seminary in Virginia, and he did his master's, and then later he finished his dissertation for doctor's degree in divinity, D.D.

DAVID TAKAMI: Did he study divinity at Princeton?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, right. Well, he, as a young man I don't know under what circumstances he was sent to missionary school in Seoul. It's called Paejae. The middle school, that was the whole school, and it was middle class, like high school here. And under the missionary tutelage he excelled in English, and when he was graduated, there were very few Koreans who could speak English. Not only speak but read and write. So he was enlisted by this customs office. And those days—it's hard to understand why it was that way—but British government was handling all of the customs houses throughout the east Asian countries—China of course, and Korea, and Japan for a time. Later, Japan took it over. So because he was able to understand or speak English, he was employed by this British government-controlled custom house. And he was sent to Mokpo, which is again the southern tip of South Korea. And he was working as an officer of the customs house there. In the meantime the missionaries, who recognized him as potential material for propagating their religious beliefs and their missionary work, they conspired to have him married to a woman, they thought it was very strong, of strong Korean Christian family. Now my mother's family came from Hwang Hae Do or Hwang Hae Province. Hwang Hae is the Yellow Sea. And so it's the western side of Korean peninsula. Her father had been a minister of King Li's cabinet. I don't know when it was, but towards the end of the Li dynasty. He was thoroughly disgusted about the ineptitude and bribery and corruption of the government at the time, so he resigned from his position and went to Hwang Hae Do. And he started, he became a farmer. In Korea, they—not only in Korea, but Japan, China—whenever these high officials, when they quit their positions, usually they go to the countryside and become a farmer. This is gentleman farmer, of course. [chuckling] But he probably had a tremendous ability for organizing and controlling. And he became a very wealthy landowner in Hwang Hae-Do. And Hwang Hae-Do was the first province that the Western missionary drift in and they landed. And so when these missionaries came, they contacted my grandfather and tried to convert them, and they converted to Christianity. And then later on they gave one of their properties, buildings, for the church and so forth. And so when my mother was born, she was born to Christian family. And she was the oldest of the family. There were three daughters. Her name was Hannah. Hundred some years ago, a Korean girl born to a Korean family and was given the name of Hannah. And her sister, next younger sister, was Miriam, and third one Maria. So from that you can imagine what kind of family it was. And her father started a school to educate the children. First what he had in mind was to educate the children, you know, three daughters. But [in—Ed.] one of these compound there was, you know, many, many houses, and opened it up for this purpose, opened up a school. And then he enrolled all the children of her age, or school-aged children, from the village. You know, all the others were the farmers. Sharecropper? Families, the children were all enlisted in the school. So with any particular knowledge or not, I don't know, but he was very progressive person. [chuckles] Those days, a sharecropper is like a servant, or, not only servant, but it's actually a, well, a whatchamacallit. Well anyway it's socially at the bottom of the rung, but he had believed that everyone is equal, and thus they were all educated in the same place, in the same schools, the same school classroom. Anyway, so she [Hannah—Ed.] was sent to Seoul to get the education from high school. And those days there was no coeducation, of course. Coeducation was something, historically rather recent happening, even in the United States in those days. She went to this woman's high school called Chong Shin girl's school.

DAVID TAKAMI: In Seoul?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: In Seoul. So the American missionaries, you know, they were thinking of having my father married to this woman graduated from Chong Shin. So they got married. And then my mother started working on him to convert him into Christianity. [chuckles]

DAVID TAKAMI: I see. Was it kind of an arranged marriage?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, it was all arranged marriage, at that time. I don't think they knew each other before. And this is something that I read about later on, but never heard from them directly. And it's kind of unusual probably, my family's especially so. My father was a man of very few words. He was not talkative at all. And not only not talkative, in general, but in family and at home, he was practically nonconversant. And that trait we all inherited! [laughs] We had seven brothers, including, including myself, and two sisters. It was big family, but that house was very quiet because no one talks anything.

DAVID TAKAMI: Especially the boys.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: Were those Protestant missionaries, or Catholic?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Protestant. Presbyterian, actually. And so I, all these family records or history, I haven't heard, I haven't talked with them. And later on I learned about all these things.

DAVID TAKAMI: I gather your mother was successful in converting your father to Christianity?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah, right. There is one episode that. . . . My mother used to put this camellia oil on her hair. And that's supposedly very good for the hair, according to Korean people, women's belief that camellia is very, very good for the hair. And some reason or other my father detested it. So they made a pact that "if you quit using camellia oil, I'll become a Christian!" [laughter] And so he became Christian, and she quit using the oil. [laughs]

DAVID TAKAMI: So was your upbringing as siblings a very Christian upbringing then?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh yes, very. Very strict, and very rigorous, you know. Churchgoing and, you know, all the Christian vesper services, and every morning family before breakfast to sit down and read the Bible and pray and so on. Sing songs and gospel songs. Anyway, so when he became a Christian, the missionaries urged him to go to a theological seminary, which was this Protestant seminary was the only one that was in Pyongyang, which is the present-day capital of North Korea. So he went there and studied for theology for four years, and then he was ordained a minister, and he was sent to Kwangju. I don't know about most of my older brothers and sisters, but probably most of them were born there, and so was I and another brother just two years younger than me. And when I was about three years old, the ministers urged him to go to the United States and continue his work, and get the M.A. and the D.D., doctor of divinity degree, from the United States. So he went, and came back in about 1923 or '4. Now let me see, I remember when I was about six years old, he came back from the United States, so it must have been about 1925 he came back. And when he came back, he was appointed to a professorship at the theological seminary in Pyongyang. So we all moved to Pyongyang. That was in 1925. And then we stayed there in Pyongyang until 1940. And I left Pyongyang in 1937. No, '36, probably, '36. Yeah, that would put me about, when I was about seventeen years old.

DAVID TAKAMI: Did you also grow up with a strong sense of your Korean nationality and culture—as well as Christianity?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh, yes. Right, yeah. Very strong traditional values. The Christians are Christians but also they believed in Confucianism as well as a good portion of Buddhism, too. I think that is true with any Christian, regardless in Japan or Korea or China. They always have these shared traditional beliefs and tradition.

DAVID TAKAMI: What about your interests, as a child, in music and art. How did that develop?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, I cannot pinpoint exactly when I developed it, but my oldest brother, who was sixteen years older than I, was what they today call Renaissance man. I don't know where he obtained all his skills, but he was, when I was aware of what he was doing, he was a poet, he was painter, he was composer, and I don't know how he learned to play piano, but he played piano. And he was also painter, and practically he could do anything—whatever he put his hands on. So there was this fertile field that I could go back to, and I really don't understand where he got all that kind of skills.

DAVID TAKAMI: So your mother and father were not that artistic?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: My mother was more of an artistic type, but my father was not very talented in artistic way.

DAVID TAKAMI: What was your older brother's name?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: John.

DAVID TAKAMI: So he was a big influence on you.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, he had a big influence. And my second sister, who is four years older than I am, was studying piano. So we had a piano, and she was taking piano lessons from American missionary musician teacher. And we were living in this missionary compound. Main structure is this theological seminary, and then it's a huge compound and with Korean professors, and there were about two or three Korean professors. And my father was the first one to become a doctor of divinity and also professor at the theological seminary. And then later on there were a few more Koreans became doctor and professors. And I think within the compound a few Korean faculty members were living, and then the rest were the Austrian, British and American missionaries living there. So it was very fertile ground, in cultural and also Western culture.

DAVID TAKAMI: Sort of international?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah. The ordinary Koreans, unless they go to the church, they wouldn't have been in contact with the Western culture, but we were living within the Western culture.

DAVID TAKAMI: Did you have a sense that you had a sort of an unusual upbringing for a Korean?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh yeah. Yes, yes. And, you know, probably everyone feels that he is chosen, you know, different from other people. But we especially had that kind of a sense of we are superior [chuckles], which I always wondered why we should have that kind of a mentality, but it was definitely different from most people. You know, we were living within this compound and in constant contact with the Western people, at higher educational, and educated people, intellectuals.

DAVID TAKAMI: Did your sister then teach you piano?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. She would go to take the lesson and come back, practice. And then I'll listen to her, and then I studied how to read the music. And I would play exactly same as my sister did. [laughs]

DAVID TAKAMI: You would study on your own?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right. Self-teaching, you know, self-taught. And because my brother, oldest brother, John, was not only good at music, but also he was good as a painter, I also had the same interest in painting. So visual art and the performing art was a parallel thing in my formative years.

DAVID TAKAMI: I was going to ask you because your photography developed in your later years, but you did have the visual. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right.

DAVID TAKAMI: . . . art background, even when you were. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, from my early ages. And as a matter of fact, when I graduated from grade school, which was called "little school," in Korean. And then high school is "middle school," and then above that is college. When I was in grade school, I used to sing in the church as boy soprano.

Tape 1, Side B

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: When I was freshman, a first year middle school student, I don't know what it was, but I was sick. I think second semester or something like that. And my uncle, who was a doctor, medical doctor, who was husband of my mother's sister Miriam, and he urged my parents that I, I should stay. . . . They thought I had some kind of disease, they never told me what. But I should not be allowed to go to school and, you know, in order to recuperate I should stay home. And so I missed school for about half a year. And at the end of the school year, I went back to school. And what the school should have done was to flunk me and so that I could start again. I missed a half of a school year.

DAVID TAKAMI: Right.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And when I got back to my class, I was way behind, especially in the scientific courses such as algebra, and chemistry, and physics, and so forth. Instead, they passed me, I don't know why. I became second year student, sophomore. And I couldn't follow them, you know. And in the meantime, when I was away from school, my interest in music had grown exponentially.

DAVID TAKAMI: While you were sick.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. And I studied musical theory, and—all by myself—and the harmony, theory of harmony, and so forth. And when I got back, I organized a brass band at school, and. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Did you play an instrument?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I played baritone, the brass instrument. And then later I formed the male chorus. And so my interest is completely occupied by music. But at the same time I was very much interested in the painting. So it was agonizing because I was way behind and I just couldn't catch up with the science courses. But somehow, some reason or other, always they passed me, you know. Gave me passing grade. So I wouldn't flunk. [chuckles]

DAVID TAKAMI: At the same time you were becoming very accomplished in the two arts.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, right. So I, in my sophomore year, I had a real dilemma, which way to go. I was pulled by both visual arts and also music. But by that time I got acquainted with another man and several male friends who were avid music lovers. And in those days, the Western music was available only through records. And there were several very wealthy friends who owned gramophone and this 78 rpm records. You know, those days one symphony comes in an album—about three or four records to cover four movements of the symphony. And we would get together two or three evenings a week, and listen to the music in a rapture. [laughs]

DAVID TAKAMI: Yeah. You said music, the music was all Western symphonic music?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, symphonic and chamber music, and also lieder, which is German, German song, art songs.

DAVID TAKAMI: Which composers of the other works?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Mostly the symphonic works are Mozart, Beethoven, and Haydn and so forth, and also Bach. From those days, I still remember listening to a Brandenburg concerto. And then all nine symphonies of Beethoven, and symphonies of Schubert and Brahms—Brahms' four symphonies, and so on, so forth.

DAVID TAKAMI: So you were leaning towards concentrating on music, then?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right. Yeah, because of ready access to this great music and performance of Western music through records. And at the time, I heard this German lieder, especially Schubert songs. One particular was "Am Meer," or "By the Sea." It's by Schubert. And the other side was "Du bist die Ruh," and sung by a German tenor called Leo Slezak. And this is the famous, Leo Slezak, whose son was. . . . I don't remember his first name, but Slezak, he was a famous movie actor in this country. Leo Slezak is an extraordinary artist. And when I heard this record, that was the deciding point and I made my mind; I have to become a singer.

DAVID TAKAMI: What did you like about the lieder?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Lieder is not only musically marvelous, but it is combination of the music and poetry. And the poems. . . . For instance, "Am Meer," is Heinrich Heine, the German Jewish poet; he's very famous. He's probably second famous next to Goethe. And Schubert composed a lot of songs on Heine, of course, and also Goethe, Schiller, and so forth. It's, you know, real topnotch poets, poems. And so there is again influence of my brother. He was a poet, and he was a writer, and I had access to all the books that he had and I just delved into all the literature on German poems and novels as well as French and Russian.

DAVID TAKAMI: So at that time you could read those languages?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, they were all in translation.

DAVID TAKAMI: I see.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And they were all in Japanese, in translation.

DAVID TAKAMI: So you grew up studying Japanese in school?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah, because Korea was under Japanese occupation every Korean student or child was supposed to learn Japanese from grade school. So our education was bilingual. There was courses in Korean and Chinese but also Japanese was the main language that we had to study and learn.

DAVID TAKAMI: So how did you pursue your desire to be a German lieder singer?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, it was very natural to me, the music, combination of music and poetry. It's not like folk songs or like Italian songs that music is marvelous, but the poem is very mediocre quality. Whereas the German, it's topnotch—both the text and the music. So I was more attracted by that aspect. And also by chance I listened to Leo Slezak, and later Gerhart Hüsck. And those are very, very famous accomplished musicians, singers, German songs. And it just had a tremendous appeal to me and also affinity to German culture and German music. So I decided I would become a German lieder singer. And this trait still remains with me, but I sort of delve into very narrow path. When I decide I'm going to do German lieder, German lieder is about ninety-nine percent, and all the other songs, other songs of other country or other culture, such as French or Russian, I would sing, and I sang Russian and French, some Italian songs, too, but the vast majority of my repertoire was German.

DAVID TAKAMI: Now are you speaking of the time in high school still?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: What voice were you, bass?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I already changed into bass at that time, yeah. And when I was a junior, there was national music contest of high school students that was held in Seoul, Korea. And I don't know who recommended me to go to it, but I traveled the night train and went to Seoul. And my sister, my sister was studying piano at E Wha Women's College. And E Wha is still in Korea and one of the top colleges. Now it's called a university. At the time it was the number one woman's college, and there was a music school within the college, and she was studying piano there. And she was my accompanist and I went to the contest.

DAVID TAKAMI: And you were coming then from Pyongyang?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Pyongyang, yeah. I don't remember exactly whether it was the junior year or senior year. Anyway, I won the first prize in singing category. And my father, until that time, was dead against me becoming a musician. He always thought I would become a minister, and that's his desire, I should become a minister. And if I'm not going to be a minister, then next I should become a medical doctor. And his reasoning was that minister, he will save the soul of mankind. If you can't, if you don't want to do it, at least you have to save the life of a human by becoming a medical doctor. And if you are not going to be a medical doctor, then you should become a lawyer, so you could help the innocent accused people.

DAVID TAKAMI: How did you respond to that?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, you see, I was a very poor student. I excelled in the arts—literature and language and history and so forth. But I was very poor in the science—mathematics and chemistry and physics. I always couldn't answer the questions or test. All I could do was just. . . . I couldn't write any answers, just the question.

DAVID TAKAMI: [laughs]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Write the very good calligraphy, and send it in. Somehow the teachers thought that I had a special aptitude in music and so they should pass me so that I could graduate. So to this day I regret it very much that. . . . Science always fascinated me, but my aptitude was not there. And probably I might have gotten my aptitude, if I didn't get sick and missed that half a year in freshman year. So it has been all my, regret all my life.

DAVID TAKAMI: So your father. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Father, I told him that I simply can not pass entrance exams. And at the same time I got this first prize in the music contest. And those days they called it not music contest but music concours. It's a French word. Exactly, "contest." But my father didn't know what concours meant. Probably he knew, but he asked his colleagues, the missionary professors, "What does concours mean?" And one of them said, "Well, that's a French word; it means 'contest'." And why do you ask?" and he said, "Oh, my son won first prize in a concours, music concours," and they say, "Oh, that is wonderful! He should become a musician." So finally he gave in: "Okay, you could go to music school." So finally he consented to me that I could go to a music school. And there was no music school in Korea. So they decided that I should go to Tokyo to study music. And by the time I found out what kind of music schools are in Tokyo—and those days all the music schools are in Tokyo; nowhere else—and then I checked all the faculty members who were teaching German lieder and their backgrounds and so forth, and I found out that Tokyo Kunitachi Conservatory of Music had a Professor Yatabe, and he was graduate of music conservatory, Conservatory of Music in Berlin. And so I decided that that is the school I must go. So when I was seventeen years old, I went to Tokyo to study music.

DAVID TAKAMI: Did you go by yourself?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

DAVID TAKAMI: By boat, I assume.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, first you have to ride the train to Pusan, and Pusan to Shimonoseki, which is southern tip of Honshu, main island of Japan. Those days I think it took about sixteen or seventeen hours from Shimonoseki to Tokyo. And Pyongyang to Pusan was about twelve hours. And overnight the boat riding. It is major travel! [chuckles]

DAVID TAKAMI: So that was the first time you made the trip?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: First time. Yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: What did you feel like on that journey? It must have been an adventure for a seventeen-year-old.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. I had a friend. I think he was one year younger than me, but he already went to Tokyo,

and was going to enter a music school, but he was not successful. But he was from Pyongyang, and he told me that I could stay with him until I find my place. And so when I arrived in Tokyo, he came out to meet me, and took me to his apartment. And my memory is really vague, but I stayed there for two or three days until I went to music school. And there was an entrance exam, and the Japanese Music School was. . . . Oh, it's called "yoka" and "honka." Yoka is preparatory class, and then main classes, three. So total of four years. And before I went to Tokyo, I studied almost daily music. And I studied all the music history, and music, especially theory. And I could play piano quite well and sing extensively. [In—Ed.] the German lieder I had a pretty good selection of songs that I could sing. And so I had the entrance exam, and I passed. But what I wanted was to skip the first preparatory class, because I thought that I had studied enough so I should go into the main courses rather than the first preliminary course. So the music school decided that that is highly unusual, you know, anyone who would come to skip one class, one first year. But they made a special case of me, and they said "Well, we will accept you for the second-year class, contingent. . . ." A kind of probation, you know. "If you do well, then we'll make you a regular student." But the first year which is the second year, not counting the preparatory. . . . So I skipped the first class and first year, and then after first semester, they made me a bona fide student. And at the end of that year, there was all-Japan music contest. It's also called concours, All-Japan Music Concours. And I went to test my ability. [chuckles] In retrospect, I was really pretty brass, brassy and brave, and. . . . Just having a first year of music school and go to the whole-Japan contest, which was never done before. And there was a preliminary contest, and then when you passed that, and then there's the final. And first you have to go to sing at one concert hall, and then if you passed that and then a second concert hall, which was the Hibiya. And that was the largest concert hall in Tokyo—and for that matter in Japan. And I passed the preliminary, and the final I didn't pass. And that jolted me. And so that was my first year of music school, which is actually second year from the school.

DAVID TAKAMI: Right.

Tape 2, side A

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: End of second year, which is the third year from the school. I decided I was prematurely not too, I was not really prepared, so I decided not to go [to the contest? (but did remain in school)—Ed.]. Instead I went to Korea and entered Korean music contest, and there I got first prize in singing, that year.

DAVID TAKAMI: So that was two that you had won in Korea?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. And then, fourth year—no, third year, but it's fourth year from school—I went back to the ninth annual all-Japan music contest. And I entered the contest, and I won that time. I won the first prize in singing.

DAVID TAKAMI: And what year was that?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That was 1939, I think, 1939.

DAVID TAKAMI: And then so during your three years at the school, what kind of courses were you taking, what were you studying?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, it is not elective like this country. Music school is very peculiar because of this special, specialized field, you know, singing or piano, violin, or composition. But other than that, that particular year main course, everything else, everyone has to study exactly same thing. And we studied choral singing, music theory, music history, composition, and piano. Piano is mandatory. Everyone, you know, regardless whether you are singer or singing major, or violin, or composition, everyone has to study piano. Oh, besides that, we had the Rede Kunst, it's German. It's oratory, or poetry reading. No other conservatory of music had that course, but our school had Professor Arima, who had graduated from Vienna Conservatory of Music. And he always bragged that he studied with the teacher who taught oratory to Adolf Hitler. [both chuckle]

DAVID TAKAMI: He was proud of it. [referring to Arima—Ed.]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right. He was very proud of it. [thinking DT was referring to Hitler—Ed.] And this Professor Arima was very proud of that, too, and he taught us the recitation of poetry—and thus teaching the proper pronunciation and all the oratorical techniques.

DAVID TAKAMI: So again, your studies then at the school was centered around Western music. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: . . . not Japanese music.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, no Japanese music at all.

DAVID TAKAMI: I was just curious. I mean, I have lived in Tokyo, and my, my aunt and relatives were living in Tokyo at the time, but do you remember. . . . What was Tokyo like at the time? I know it was a prewar period.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh, yes.

DAVID TAKAMI: What were some of your recollections of. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, my school was located in the place called Kunitachi. That's why they called it Kunitachi University, or Kunitachi Music University. It's actually on this Chuo honsen, or mainline, central mainline of the kokutetsu—Japan national railway, railway line, which is about, oh, forty-five minutes from Shinjuku. And it was way out in the sticks those days. When you step out of the train station, everywhere it was woods. And there was another university, which was commercial university. And commercial, that means the economics university, or business administration university. And the other was Kunitachi Ongaku Gakko—or music school, Kunitachi Music School. And in 1982, my first visit back to Japan. . . . Well, I'll take it back. I went back to Japan just passing through in 1945. No, '48, going back to Korea from Seattle. I came to Seattle in 1947, and '48 I went back to Korea, and. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: You went through Japan?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, I went through Tokyo. I was going by this Army transport, the ship, and we had a stayover of a couple of days only, and didn't have a chance to go and visit my school. But '82 when I went back, stepped out of Kunitachi, it was almost the same as Shinjuku at the time I was going to school. [chuckling]

DAVID TAKAMI: Yeah.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And it was really amazing. There was no sight of a forest or woods at all.

DAVID TAKAMI: I know what you mean. So it was very built up and citylike. But at the time that you were there as a student. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: It's a very. . . . You know, there were farms right next to our school, and we could walk to Tachikawa, which is. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Tachikawa?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. . . . famous as a what? I think it's army, naval, no, air force base, or something like that. But at the time there was nothing like that, and we could walk through all these fields of vegetable gardens to go to visit Tachikawa. So it was a long, long time ago, almost, fifty-some years ago.

DAVID TAKAMI: Were you aware of a sort of national feeling of militarism. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: . . . or was that more removed from you in your studies?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, it was permeating, not only militarism, but everything was so rigid. And the police, for instance, there was an intelligence section, you know, who always checked you, especially ones from Korea. We had to always go there and get the clearance, [to—Ed.] go back to Korea and coming back. And from Korea, Koreans were Japanese citizens at the time, but we had to have a special permission to go to Japan, and so forth. And those were long rides on train, and especially on the ferry boat—overnight ferryboat ride—and always there is this detectives assigned to intelligence would pull you up to their office and grill you and, you know, questions and so forth. It was a really very traumatic experience. And while there was a certain degree of difference between Koreans and Japanese, but even Japanese were having a real hard time. Especially the ones who had [become—Ed.] acquainted with humanism and human rights, and the Western culture, they had a hard time reconciling with the way Japan was leading the nation into.

DAVID TAKAMI: So did you, did the ordinary Japanese people live in that, did they treat you differently because you were Korean?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: It depended, maybe depended on the person.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, well, this is not only that time, but it's a Japanese trait, especially Japanese trait. It's very discriminating. Very racist nation. I don't know where they got that. And I think it is from the inferior complex. They always try to make it, sounds like that Japan is an unbroken lineage from the legendary era, you know, Kamiyo? And all the way to present-day, there was only one royal lineage, and so forth. Which is totally

dumb. [laughs] When it's not true. But they were trying to inculcate the nation, everyone, to believe it. Especially in preparation of this Second World War, they were trying to form the uniform way of thinking and their heritage and history and so forth. I think that, when you read the Japanese history very critically, it is evident that Japanese culture is from, either from China or through Korea. And a lot of the Korean culture influenced—like artistic endeavors, especially in the field of art, painting, and also ceramic art, in particular. Korean is still a very dominating influence. But Japanese, because of this inferior position, that they had to learn everything from either Korea or from China, they like to suppress and then they became a very militarily potent country, so they looked down on Koreans and Chinese. And this is a still-prevailing tendency of Japanese people.

DAVID TAKAMI: Um hmm, I agree.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: That's true. Well, there's many—I'm sure you know—the many Koreans who live there now are always sort of struggling with that.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. The third generation, fourth generation, they are still aliens. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Yeah.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . and they have to go out of the country every year or every two years, I don't remember exactly. And they come back and apply for a visa again, which is really . . . gross.

DAVID TAKAMI: It's changing, but very slowly, I think.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right. It'll take a long, long time. Yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: Because it is a national tendency. So you, I think Alan [Chong Lau—Ed.] told me that you met your wife in Japan?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Um hmm.

DAVID TAKAMI: At the school?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. No, after I graduated from the music school. And one of the major Japanese singers was Madame Hara, Nobuko Hara. And she was looking for a bass for her opera company. There were about two or three opera companies at the time in Tokyo, and hers was one. And she needed a real bass, and so somehow she got hold of me and asked me to come and study with her. She promised that she wouldn't charge me any tuition, and to just come and study with her. And then, besides taking lesson from her, she had an opera company that rehearsed once every week, so I must come to this rehearsal. And I went there and I found that she [Mineko Namkung—Ed.] was one of the members there. So we became friends, and later we married.

DAVID TAKAMI: Did you marry in Tokyo, or did you. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. Her family. . . . Her father was dead against our marriage. But he was a quite well known painter in Tokyo, and well known throughout Japan. And he was rather, oh, irresponsible husband and father, and he could make good money, but whenever he make some money he would just go out and spend for enjoyment—his own enjoyment. And so she had a pretty hard time. And probably because of that, he worried that he wouldn't have his daughter married to another artist. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: [chuckles]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . which might turn out to be the same as he had been, so he was against our marriage. [laughing] And then, about that time, he just left his home and went away to a small town near Tokyo on the pretext that he was painting there, and he lived with a housekeeper. And so towards the end of my stay in Tokyo, my wife was living with her mother, and we decided that we should go to Shanghai, where my family was living at the time.

DAVID TAKAMI: Your father had another new post?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. About 1939, '38, '39, at that time, Japan was going directly on the course of the Second World War. And even before that—1937 was it?—they invaded North Korea, [correcting to:] North China, Manchuria. And they set up the puppet country, Manchukuo. And the government was all controlled by the military. And this Shintoism was the thing that the entire country has to believe in. And Korea, they forced everyone to go to Shinto shrine and worship the Shinto shrine and Shintoism. And they always look for the leader of certain aspect, of a—cultural aspect or social aspect—to cooperate with them. In other words, [collaborators—Ed.]. They approached my father because he was the Christian leader of Korea and forced him to

go to a Shinto shrine and worship and so forth. So he was protesting and would not succumb to it. And finally it was simply impossible; otherwise he would have go to jail. I don't know what kind of connection he had, but he decided to go to Shanghai. So one day he sold everything and then took whole family to Shanghai. [laughs]

DAVID TAKAMI: And you were in Tokyo at the time.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I was in Tokyo, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: And then you decided to go join them.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: Both, you were both. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, we were not married then, and I went there in 1940, to Shanghai, and then my wife came over in 1941, early 1941, and then we got married in June of that year. And then December of that year, the Second World War broke out.

DAVID TAKAMI: So, what did you do in Shanghai?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: We opened up a private music school. It's called the Shanghai Music Institute. And my wife and I taught music, private lessons, mostly to Japanese living there, for instance.

DAVID TAKAMI: You know, I've heard a lot about Shanghai before the Communist takeover, I mean, that it was a wonderful city. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, it's a real cosmopolitan. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Was that your experience there, too?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. Well, before the war broke out, there were concessions, you know. French concession, and then previously British concession, Japanese concession, and Italian concession, and so on and so forth. And later it was divided into French concession and, you know, international concession, which was combination of all these other countries. And there was a river, it is called Huangpu Creek, and south of Huangpu Creek is this international concession area, and south of that is French concession. North of this creek still it is international but dominated by Japanese. And we were living in this area, the northern part. And then early morning of December eighth—that was eighth over there, it was the seventh here—the war broke, and we were living on this particular street and our apartment was second floor. Early morning was the soldier marching. And then later you hear tanks rumbling, and then you hear the warships' cannon firing and so forth, and knew that the war was breaking. And so before that I had been living in Shanghai part of 1940 and '41. There was a lot of Western population in the entire area. And there used to be a Russian ballet and symphony orchestra, which was financed and under the direct aegis of the international concession. And when the war broke out, the whole thing was taken over by Japan, including international concession as well as the French concession, so the whole thing became Japanese. And [with the—Ed.] the dissolution of government, the international concession government, the symphony orchestra and the Russian ballet all became kaput. And I don't remember exactly how long it took, probably in about half a year, we found out there were. . . . [In—Ed.] this intelligence division of Japanese army was a professor from Tokyo, Tokyo University, at the time it was called Tokyo Imperial University. And he was professor of philosophy, specializing in Hegel, a German philosopher. And it was not me, but there were several Japanese personage, people that got together and contacted this professor, and we helped to revive this symphony orchestra and Russian ballet. And so the intelligence division of Japanese army thought that is good idea, you know, the cultural aspect of this endeavor is worthwhile to spending some money, because spending money in those days, they just printed money, you know. [said with a smile]

DAVID TAKAMI: Yeah.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: So we were able to revive this Shanghai Philharmonic Symphony, and a little later Russian ballet. So while we were teaching, I volunteered to work for the Shanghai Philharmonic. It was a very funny arrangement, but I took over the editing the program notes and things like that. And at the same time I had a column for a Japanese newspaper at the time, and write the critique of the performances, of music and other cultural aspects.

DAVID TAKAMI: That's interesting the way that came about.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: But so the whole city was a very lively, cultural. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right.

DAVID TAKAMI: . . . and arts city. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

DAVID TAKAMI: . . . from what you have described.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Um hmm.

DAVID TAKAMI: And very international, too.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Very international, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: Did some of that change when the war began?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: I mean, you said there were many Japanese there.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah. Well, you know, Japanese army just took over everything, every aspect, you know—economic, social, and cultural.

Tape 2, side B

DAVID TAKAMI: So I think we were talking about Shanghai, and the Japanese military taking over. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right.

DAVID TAKAMI: But did they actually, did Japan actually occupy Shanghai?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: That was part of their territory?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah, yeah. Even before that, you know, outside Shanghai was occupied [by—Ed.] Japan. But Shanghai itself was, because of this international concession, it was occupied after the war, the Second World War broke out.

DAVID TAKAMI: What is a concession? I'm sorry; was it area or. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. There was several concessions in China, like Canton, Shanghai, Tianjin. Those places were occupied by the foreign countries, and then they set up a Sokai—or Zujie in Chinese—and it's called a concession because it's a concession wrested from Chinese government, that foreign governments set up their own governments, municipal governments, and controlled all aspects of the city life.

DAVID TAKAMI: Um hmm. So how did you feel as a Korean as the war began and supposedly you were technically a Japanese citizen?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. Every Korean was a Japanese citizen, although in fact they were second-class or third-class citizens, but. . . . Taiwan is also same thing. Taiwan was under Japanese domination.

DAVID TAKAMI: So you, you didn't have any loyalties [chuckles] obviously to much of the Japanese empire.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, politically I was against Japan, but culturally I was with Japan, and all my friends. And it was a window to Western culture, through Japanese. You know, like literature. . . . Today, even today, it's the same thing but, whenever a new novel or a new publication comes out in Germany or in France, the translation appears almost simultaneously in Tokyo. Like Dostoyevsky, there were about three different versions of complete work of Dostoyevsky. Tolstoy, Gogol, and Gorky, and so on, so forth, I mean, as far as the Russians go. And then French. . . . Gide, for instance. Gide was very popular in Japan. German literature, Hermann Hesse, and of course the Heine, Schiller, and so on, so forth.

DAVID TAKAMI: So it was a very sophisticated culture. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right.

DAVID TAKAMI: . . . and sort of broad-minded.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. So Japan, culturally very cosmopolitan. And as a Korean, Japan was the only way you can get the nourishment of Western culture. And for that reason, my allegiance, cultural allegiance was, even today, is with Japan. And especially because of the very susceptible age of seventeen on, all the way, I was nourished by Japanese culture. And later on, after I came to this country, and then I'd look back to the original Japanese culture. You know, even music. I studied koto, for instance, koto and shamisen.

DAVID TAKAMI: In this country, you did.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, in this country. While I was there, it sounded so, so unnatural and so alien. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: If you were just immersed in Western music. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . immersed in Western music. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: . . . and then to hear the koto, which is. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah. And it is not only my case, but all the Japanese musicians, the famous musicians of Western music. Once they leave the country, they appreciate the Japanese or the national music.

DAVID TAKAMI: What about the Korean music, or Korean culture?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Same thing. I get the affinity, and also yearning of [meaning "for"—Ed.] the Korean culture. And it may not have happened if I stayed in Korea, or in Japan.

DAVID TAKAMI: So you were in Shanghai for a few years then. Then what happened?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Four years. Actually it's 1940 to 1944. And November we left Shanghai, because, unlike in Japan, in Shanghai there was a lot more contact with the outside world. Japan was completely controlled. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Right.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . and everything was censored, and people didn't know what's happening, what's really happening in the war. But we could sense much more keenly in Shanghai that Japan would be defeated within a year. And I felt it was dangerous to remain in Shanghai, especially my wife. I might be okay as a Korean, but she may have hard time, so we decided. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Was there a hint of the Communist party or Communist power at the time?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, no. It was still in, within the Japanese military groups, although the Chinese Communist was very strong in the rural areas. A few hundred miles away from this metropolitan area is all controlled by the Chinese Communists. Either Communists or Nationalists.

DAVID TAKAMI: So then, from Shanghai where did you go?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: We went back to Japan. And it happened to be the last boat leaving from Shanghai to Japan, and. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: In '44, you said.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, November 1944. It usually takes only overnight from Shanghai to Nagasaki, but the southern China sea was infested by American U-boats, submarines, and so we couldn't go there, and they let the ship hover along the eastern coast of China all the way to Qingdao, and then dashed across to western coast of Korea, and then went down along the coast. And we were attacked a couple of times by submarine, and fortunately they missed, and. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: By sub, torpedo?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Torpedos, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: So they didn't distinguish between the passenger ship or military?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No. There is no difference. [chuckles]

DAVID TAKAMI: So it was a great risk, then, for you.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah. We didn't realize that it was that dangerous, but you know, we realized it when they were not going eastward but going up north, and we were wondering why they go up north rather than go back to Japan. And then later we found out that it was impossible to go across.

DAVID TAKAMI: Um hmm.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And so it took, oh, almost a week to get to Kobe. And we didn't know where we were going to disembark, but they went into Kobe, and so we got off at Kobe. And then we stayed in Nara for three or four months, trying to settle somewhere, but couldn't find any place to go to, because there was carpet bombing all over. Kobe was all burned, and Osaka was, you know, we could see the flames and even if it was not flame, that direction was all bombing and all red glare all over the skies.

DAVID TAKAMI: But they were, the Americans were sparing Kyoto and Nara. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Kyoto and Nara, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: . . . because of the cultural relics?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right. Um hmm. And there was no military installations or industry to speak of, so they didn't attack.

DAVID TAKAMI: During this time, it seems like a time that you were moving around more and not sure where you were going to live.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: Was your music career sort of on hold at the time, then?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah. I couldn't do much, you know. Main thing was how to survive until Japan surrenders. And then we didn't know they were not going to bomb Nara or Kyoto, but it was getting closer and closer [chuckling], and so we decided one day, "Well, we have to go to Korea." Korea being occupied country rather than main Japan, so they wouldn't firebomb Korea as they were doing in Japan, so we went to Korea. And then my sister, the pianist sister, was living in Seoul, so we went to Seoul. And then in August war came to end. So then American occupation forces came in. My knowledge in English was very halting, but still better than most Korean people, so the military government asked me to work for them. And so I went to work as an interpreter. But then later on, there was a radio station in Korea, and it had a division, the military government hour, and then regular hours. And they asked me to become a production advisor of the military government hours, so I handled the music aspect of that broadcasting, for about a year, I think. And then I went to work for Seoul Symphony Orchestra. And after that. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: What did you do with the Seoul Symphony?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Oh, they called it inspector; I don't know what inspector is. It's a kind of a. . . . I was not a general manager, but acting manager or something like that. And after that, in '47, I think, that somehow, I don't know under what circumstances it was, but a major in the American army got hold of me, and asked me to become his personal interpreter. And it was the Seventh Army, I think. And I went to work for him, and he, he was telling me there, "You must come to Seattle and study music."

DAVID TAKAMI: Oh! [laughter]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: He's a Seattle man.

DAVID TAKAMI: Yeah. American.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: American major.

DAVID TAKAMI: So, you were interpreting between English and Japanese, or Korean?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Korean.

DAVID TAKAMI: Korean and English.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, yeah. And at the same time I was asked to join the choir, the military choir, church choir, and so I got acquainted with the president of Seoul University. And he happened to be a Seattle man. [chuckling] And he used to teach at the Seattle Pacific College here. Now it's called the Seattle Pacific University, but at the time it was called college.

DAVID TAKAMI: He was an American also?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. Yeah, Dr. Ansted, he was the president of the Seoul University, and he was telling me that I must come to Seattle and study my music. . . . Harry Ansted, I think.

DAVID TAKAMI: So there were two connections to Seattle. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: . . . in Korea at the time.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, yeah. Major Norman Miller was the military major. And then other American missionaries were telling me that I must go to Westminster Choir College in New Jersey. So I applied for a scholarship from Westminster and Seattle Pacific College, and I think it's about August of 1947 the scholarship came from Seattle Pacific College for myself and my wife. So the following week or about half a month later, a scholarship came from Westminster, too, but then I didn't know which one is better, and there was a strong pull by these two gentlemen, and so we decided to come to Seattle. And October of 1947 we landed here, after a two-week trip on this Army boat. And we went to Seattle Pacific College to find out it is a very strange [laughing] Free Methodist college, and very, very strict.

DAVID TAKAMI: Was it at the same location as it is now?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, same location. It was much smaller than now.

DAVID TAKAMI: Near the Fremont area.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, yeah, yeah. And they didn't have living quarters for married couples. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Oh!

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: . . . [laughing] so I was put into men's dormitory, and she was put into the women's dormitory, and. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Even if you were married.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That's right, yeah. But within a couple of weeks we found an apartment, so we moved into an apartment. But the most difficulty was that very strict religious school, and, you know, it's very dogmatic. Every morning you have to go to chapel, and there's service before you go to your class. And sometimes in class, some guy start praying, you know, before the class and then everyone keeps praying, and I thought it was a kind of ploy that when they didn't want to study, they started praying! [laughs] And the music department was very rudimentary. It was just. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Compared to your prior training.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Compared to my background and training.

DAVID TAKAMI: Yeah.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And so I had a real difficulty what to do. And at the time. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: At the time, what were you interested in studying?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Music.

DAVID TAKAMI: Just continuing your. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, graduate work. Well, actually, the reason we came to the United States was there was nowhere else to go to.

DAVID TAKAMI: After the Tokyo Conservatory or. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, from Korea. And it was, the living condition was very poor, and Koreans were very anti-Japanese, and she had a hard time. And then I heard the rumor that I was blacklisted because I was married to a Japanese woman.

DAVID TAKAMI: When you were in Korea.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: So that must have been difficult.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right. That was the direct reason that we had to get out of Korea, but going to Japan was impossible. First place, it's very difficult to go to, and Japan was in, you know, it was in real trouble. . .

DAVID TAKAMI: Um hmm. Very poor.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Very poor.

DAVID TAKAMI: Did you feel kind of like a man without a country, or. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: A man without a country, and culturally more devastated. And actually we had the tendency, you know. . . . Even today it's the same thing, but the people in, intellectuals in Japan, they always look down on America, the United States, you know, this country. "No culture." [laughs] Actually, we wanted to go to Germany, but Germany—in order to continue my study—but Germany was in the even worse situation than in Japan. And there was no way to go that. . . . We were just vaguely hoping that someday we might be able to go to Europe. But first we had to get out of Korea, and, and the logical place to go to would be the United States.

DAVID TAKAMI: What was your first impressions of the United States? Besides the school and the. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Well, came to Seattle, and, back in 1940's, late forties, this was a real hick town. [laughter] There was practically no cultural. . . . We had the Seattle Symphony at the time, too, but it was very mediocre. And university was the only source you can feel that there is still some cultural remnants.

DAVID TAKAMI: The University of Washington?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. And when we first arrived here, a Korean couple—he was professor at the University of Washington in charge of Korean department—and we became very close friends. He was born and raised in Pyongyang, and so we became very close friends. And he found that we had a real predicament in our education at Seattle Pacific College, so he urged me to come to the University of Washington. But I had just got the scholarship from Seattle Pacific College, and we were there less than three months, and I felt very bad about leaving the college. But he insisted that we, you know, "You are just wasting your time. You have to come to university." And he made arrangement with the music school at the university to have an audition. So I had an audition, and. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: A singing audition?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Singing, yeah. And the director of music school, and then a music professor had just arrived from East Coast, and lieder singer. And so I sang several songs, and they immediately gave me scholarship, and not only scholarship, but a teaching assistant's job. And they said this is a T.A. job, but because of your English you will not be able to teach, so [this is—Ed.] kind of a scholarship, and we'll give you a T.A. salary, and work for music library. So I worked there.

DAVID TAKAMI: And then how long were you at the UW as a student?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That was '48, late '48, and until '51.

DAVID TAKAMI: You mentioned a Korean couple that you met.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

DAVID TAKAMI: Were there other Koreans then in Seattle at the time you were going to school?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, several Korean students came with us on same boat, were studying at the University of Washington.

DAVID TAKAMI: And then did you eventually become a citizen of the United States?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, it took a long time, a long time to become a citizen. But forty, '48, there was a Japanese professor; Henry Tatsumi was the professor and head of the Japanese department, and he needed an assistant who could—well, how do you call it?—well, to teach the conversational Japanese. And he wanted to have someone with impeccable Japanese-speaking knowledge, without much English, so that, you know, it was very difficult to find someone. . . .

Tape 3, side A

[JN sounds in this tape side as if he's quite tired—Ed.]

DAVID TAKAMI: So you were going to become a language, teach. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, she [Mineko—Ed.] was employed by Professor Tatsumi to drill the students, and preferably who doesn't speak English, so that she would be forced to speak in Japanese only. That was the whole idea. So for us it was a wonderful opportunity. I got the T.A. job at the music school, and she got the, this

teaching assistant job at the Far Eastern Department, it was called the Far Eastern Department [chuckles] at the time [now called East Asian Studies—JN].

DAVID TAKAMI: Oh.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: We were very happy, and we transferred to the University of Washington, and I could get the much higher level of education, and especially from this newer, newly arrived professor from the East Coast. We were very happy. However, we left our two children—we had two daughters—when we came here first in '47. As students, we were not allowed to bring our children. So we left them with my family, and her mother, who was living with us in Seoul at the time. And didn't have any idea whether we could bring them over, but we just had faith that something will, may work out. And so, in '48, when she got this job, in spring quarter, and summer quarter came, summer vacation, and I got an idea I better talk to Professor Tatsumi, and I get her job, and then I'll become a faculty member.

DAVID TAKAMI: [chuckles]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: And as a faculty of university, I should be able to change my status, immigration status, from that of student to that of a professor—or faculty. So I. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: So you could become a permanent resident.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Right, right. And so I talked with Henry Tatsumi, and, who thought I spoke Japanese as well as she did, so I could easily take over her job, which was, you know, mainly drilling. But when I went there, and when he gave me job, on top of the, drilling these freshman students, also assigned me to teach the graduate students, and so go into more syntax and grammar. I was very much interested in linguistics, and so I had much more experience and knowledge about the, teaching language. So Henry Tatsumi gave me that position, and so I decided I should change to a different category of the immigration, and tried to change my status here, but it was impossible. And they say I have to first go out of the country and come back. And nearest place was Canada, but it seemed to be very difficult. So since we'd left our children, and I thought, "Well, I'd better go back to Korea, and give up the student visa, and apply for a new visa, and then bring my children back. So in November I went back to Korea.

DAVID TAKAMI: Which year was this? Do you remember?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: That was '48.

DAVID TAKAMI: '48.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. And so went back in November to Korea, and then I applied for a a new visa at the American Embassy. And I got acquainted with a very young consul, and we became quite good friends, and he was very sympathetic, and it was very difficult, and my father was first angry, you know. "You came back, and you had a visa as student, and you come back and you don't know whether you will get the new visa or not, and came back without making an inquiry or anything. . . ." He was very pessimistic. But with the help of this consul, I was able to get the visa. And under that category I was able to bring my children. And not only my children, but I also brought one of my younger brothers. So in March 1949, we left Korea and came over. And at the time, Northwest Airlines just opened the route to Korea, and we flew back here in a DC-3. [laughs]

DAVID TAKAMI: So that was your first flight?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: First flight, yeah.

DAVID TAKAMI: DC-3. [chuckles]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, DC-3. It's seating only about twenty-some people. [chuckles] And it had to stop in Tokyo first, and then Aleutian Island, a small island called Shemya, and then to Anchorage, and Anchorage to Seattle. And we landed in Seattle airport. SeaTac, it was just a little hut, was terminal building. [laughter] Like this portable, you know, grade school portables, do you remember these, right after Second World War there was a small. . . . And that was all. And it's amazing that in fifty years, forty-five years, that Seattle became this big.

DAVID TAKAMI: It is, yeah. So how were your studies at the UW? Were they interesting and rewarding?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, it was pretty rewarding, and, you know. . . .

DAVID TAKAMI: You were a music student?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. Both my wife and I went to graduate school then. And I studied voice, of course, and

then theory—music theory—counterpoint and other things. And musicology. And had my first recital in 1950, and again in '51. And I finished my M.A. degree in '51.

DAVID TAKAMI: And then, did you. . . .

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: I was teaching and studying.

DAVID TAKAMI: You continued to teach.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah. And after I finished my work at the university, I decided to leave the university for a while and then look into another possibility. The problem was that I was specializing in German lieder, and German lieder is no way to make living in this country! [laughter]

DAVID TAKAMI: Yeah. Could you make a living in Germany with German lieder? [laughs]

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: In Germany, yes, or in Japan, yes. But not in the United States. I think we should stop there, and maybe have another session some other time.

DAVID TAKAMI: Could I just ask you one question?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yes.

DAVID TAKAMI: And that is. . . . I noticed, and this is just regarding your photography, that you, you are interested in nature, and have taken pictures of nature. Was that an interest as you were growing up, nature?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: No, I was constantly amazed of. . . . When I first started photography, I remember what I was photographing at the time, and what I'm photographing now are exactly the same thing. And it's like, you know, my pursuit of German lieder, you know. From the very beginning, and I went into music through lieder, and then ended up with lieder. Didn't deviate anywhere else. And there was a strong pull of opera, but I never went into opera singing.

DAVID TAKAMI: As you said, you were very directed.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, right. And photography, the same thing. It's nature, but not nature in like landscape photography, things like that, of photographing recognizable scenery and things like that. I always depict some aspect of nature, which I feel that is the essence of the element of the nature. And that's what I've been doing all these years.

DAVID TAKAMI: Were you interested in nature as a child?

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Not really. I don't know, it's funny, but coming from a third world country, I really didn't know the country side of life. I always lived in the big cities, and so I didn't have much contact with nature as such, until I came to this country, I mean Seattle. And then, you know, it was overwhelming [chuckling] nature over here, almost.

DAVID TAKAMI: Wilderness.

JOHSEL NAMKUNG: Yeah, wilderness experience was so overwhelming.

DAVID TAKAMI: Um hmm. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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