

Edwin Lelepali

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Edwin Lelepali (EL)

Kalaupapa, Moloka'i

May 30, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is May 30, 1998 and my name is Jeanne Johnston. I'm in Kalaupapa, Moloka'i and I am interviewing Edwin Lelepali.

Edwin, will you give me your full name?

EL: My full name is Edwin Ka'imi Lelepali.

JJ: When were you born, Edwin?

EL: I was born in the year 1927, December 27.

JJ: And where were you born?

EL: I was born in Honolulu.

JJ: Can you tell me a little bit about your family? Who was your father?

EL: Okay, my father was working at Honolulu Iron Works [Company]. That part I remember. And we were such a poor family in those days. In fact, I couldn't say it's a family because it was only my father and I. My mother died when she gave birth to me, so I was told, from my father, that when he had to make a choice, he took my mother's side. He wanted to save my mother and let me go but they couldn't save my mother, but they could save me. So the choice was, they had to save me and let my mother go. That's what I was told from my father.

JJ: What was your father's name?

EL: My father's name was David Lelepali. And then it was hard when he told me what choice he had to make, you see. But what I admire about him, is that he told me that he had a choice, so he chose his wife and let me go but it wasn't so. They could save me but they couldn't save her, so he told me everything, how the thing came about. And then he told me that he loved me, and I told him I loved him too when he told me that. I said, "Dad, I love you very much. Because you told me the truth." That is really worth something to me at that time, even how young I was.

JJ: What was your mother's name?

- EL: My mother's name was Amy, her maiden name was Amy Pai. And then she passed away giving birth to me.
- JJ: Were both of your parents Hawaiian?
- EL: Yes, my mother was mostly Chinese. More on the Chinese side. My father was Hawaiian so it was half-half. Half Hawaiian, half Chinese, that's my nationalities. So I had no brothers, no sisters, only me. Then when I was about, oh, I'd say about five or six years, he adopted another—girl to raise with me so that I could call her sister. But in Hawaiian, you call that *hānai*, you see. So that's why I had my sister with me. But I was so jealous when he brought her home because it was only he and I, nobody else, he bring in this girl and tell, "From now on, this is your sister."
- JJ: How old was she?
- EL: She was about one year older than me. No, about, maybe about, two years older than me. And then I didn't like her one bit. I beat her up. So my father was so mad that he explained to me that when he goes to work, only me at home so now going get one mate with me. So that's why I had to accept her. Gradually, I did accept her.
- JJ: What part of Honolulu did you live in?
- EL: Well, we lived Honolulu, you know those days, they call it—something like one tenement houses, like. Those days, we were very poor so it was just like two little rooms. We were brought up in these two little rooms and then that was we called home, even how small I was. It was home.
- JJ: What kind of games did you play?
- EL: Oh, when I was small, we played baseball, we played football. And then we used to enjoy going to the park, meeting new people, and we just—meeting new people, I mean children. And you start get involve with them and that's how you make friends. So I had many, many friends. Until the day I was told that I had to go to the Kalihi Hospital because of my sickness [i.e. Hansen's disease]. That was just about—I made about ten years old, I was separated from my father.
- So we went to Kalihi Hospital, those days that was Kalihi Hospital, that was the receiving station for this leprosy.
- JJ: Was that on O'ahu?
- EL: That was in O'ahu. And then we stayed there—I stayed there until the year 1942. Then we started to—they planned to send us to Kalaupapa because Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese and we were so close, they were scared. We saw everything, the bombing, we saw the planes and everything. They just flew right over us. But we thought they were exercising some kind. You know how small. . . . Then they told us no, that was the real thing because we can see all the smoke coming up, the fires, black smoke. So we know that was in the plane. That was for the real thing. Then they told us that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. So when they attacked Pearl Harbor, they made it so that we were too near to Pearl Harbor then. So they had to ship us to Kalaupapa. We didn't want to come to Kalaupapa but they said, "No, we have to go." So we came. The year was 1942, May 15.

JJ: And how old were you then?

EL: I was fourteen, going over to fifteen, when I came over. There were other children much younger than me so we all came up. I was told that while we were coming up, we were escorted by some of the ships, you know that, navy ships. But we couldn't see but they kept us in way—where they keep the cow, that's where they kept us.

JJ: What ship did you come on?

EL: I think that was the *Hawai'i*, the big ship, *Hawai'i*. That's what I think the name was, *Hawai'i*. That is the kind of ship they haul cattle like that, so where we were put, because I was sick I guess, they kept us down in the hole where they keep the cattle.

JJ: How many of you were there?

EL: We had about thirty-eight of us came up.

JJ: Just children or . . .

EL: No, we had children and grown-ups come up together. But we had more children though.

JJ: Which lead the whole group from the hospital, was that all?

EL: Yeah, all the one they had from down there, the Kalihi receiving station, that's where we were shipped out. And then we had a mother with us who takes care of us. I don't want to mention her name, though. So she takes us and came up. So we all came up together. And then we didn't want to stay up here, we didn't want to be up here at all. I wanted to go back to my family because, oh, it was a sad day when you had to leave our family down at the pier. I saw my father and my adopted sister down there, and my other half-sister that came down, three of them came and then I start crying. Oh, it was a very, very sad day.

So when we came up here, they told us that this is our final resting place. We wasn't going to leave this place already. So we figure that's the last time we're going to see our family. But no, there came a time, I think, one year later, my father came up to visit. But I didn't know was him, it was long time I never see him. He came only for one day, then he had to fly right out again. It was the first time I saw my father here. And then afterwards, they made plan and they came up and I can see them once again. So when they came up here then I told them, you know, "I don't think I want to go back to Honolulu already because we love it up here already. We go fishing, we go hunting. We have so much up here that us kids like to do." So we just enjoyed ourselves.

I told my father, "I no care what, I don't want to go back to Honolulu already." Because the place we were, we cannot do things like this, hunting and all. We cannot do.

JJ: Did you go to school here too when you got here?

EL: Go where?

JJ: Did you go to school?

EL: Oh yeah. They did make school for us. We had two classes. One was little higher class and one was the low class. And we were set at the high class to start off. I think the highest we can go is

the eighth grade, that's all. If we like continue our studies, we have to go down to Honolulu and start. There was another receiving station at Hale Mohalu, then at Pearl City. That's where they say whoever want to continue their education, can go down there and continue. But I chose to stay here already. Tried to graduate at eighth [grade]. But I didn't make it. Seventeen years, I *wen* quit school. I *wen* start to go work. I wanted to go back work.

JJ: What kind of work did you do?

EL: In those days, we doing yard work mostly. But before that, before the yard work, while still attending school, I used to work in the dining room, wash dishes and set the table and do all kind sorts of things in the dining room because our school doesn't start till eight o' clock so by the time eight o' clock, our job *pau* already. It take about seven o' clock to eight o' clock, we can do all those things for us then I can attend school eight o' clock. That's why good. I continued school even while I was working. So, because of that, I started working pretty early. And then when I was about seventeen, I quit the school and I wanted to work and make more money. In those days, you wanted to make money. So that's how.

I can not forget that year, '46. I was working for somebody in their garden. Those days, because of the war, everybody grow their own vegetables. I was working for this person, cleaning his garden and plant vegetables. That's what I was doing that morning. Here comes my friends running up to me.

He tell me, "Hey. they get big kind waves. I think that's tidal wave."

I said, "Nah, no give me that." I said, "You guys think today's April Fools' day, no way I going believe you."

JJ: What time was that?

EL: That was about, I'd say about seven-thirty or little more, eight o' clock, when they told me. That's when they told me. That time, all kind things was happening down here they told me.

But I said, "Nah." So I never believe them until about, I'd say about, eight-thirty or quarter to nine. Then I heard people washing their car. Sheeh, must be something happening so I *wen* go look way down the other corner. Then I saw the waves coming in. The wave come in, pick up those beach houses, slam 'em right through the coconut trees. Pick up one other big beach house, suck it right out to the ocean. Then, I believe, yeah that was a tidal wave.

JJ: How many people were living down here at that time?

EL: Oh, I think that time we came, they told us there was about 470, 480-something people. That's what I was told. So those days when we came, we had a lot of people over here. Lot of people. And then the saddest part when we came, ho, people was dying every day because of the sick. But not of leprosy. They was dying from tuberculosis, that's what I heard. And they was dying like mad, boy. So we got scared because of all that.

JJ: Was that also in 1946? Or it started when you first arrived?

EL: Was all during that—when we came up 1942, say from '43 on then we start to take notice those things. People been dying and people sick. Get all kinds of sick then. During that time from 1942

to 1946, you see a lot of people died. And then from 1946 on to I would say maybe another two years, then it start to quiet down. Then people start to be better each time and then took care more of themselves. Yeah, and then—that was some day when we had that big tidal wave.

JJ: Was anybody injured or killed?

EL: Well so far, nobody was. But instead of them running away from the beach, they all was going down to watch the beach, go look because when water suck it going all out, you see all the bottom.

JJ: What did it look like?

EL: Oh, no, I didn't see it. I was—like I said, I thought they were lying to me so I didn't come down. But lot of people saw that. But all I saw was the waves coming over the graveyard, coming in, pushing the beach houses into the coconut trees, sucking the other ones out. I saw all that. Then I believed. Yeah.

JJ: So how long did all this take?

EL: Well, the biggest damage ever did was, they put one of the houses towards road that you cannot pass. Just enough one car can go through the road in the path. That's how they put the whole house, right here, across the road. And then our pipeline at Waikolu, that's where our water coming from, Waikolu, into the settlement. The whole line was sucked out because the wave was so strong it damage all the pipeline. So we went without water—gee I don't know—maybe about two weeks, I think.

JJ: Wow. Where did you get the water?

EL: I think they brought in water. They brought in water. And then they used the salt water for our toilet, like that. And then if we like wash clothes, we have to go up the stream, up at Wailea where it's way down—we cannot go up but the up was good for drinking water. They catch that water, load them in the barrels and give us drinking water. That's what they used to do.

JJ: So was there any damage here in 1960 from the tidal wave then?

EL: No. I think this was the biggest one is 1946. That's the biggest I've seen, the biggest damage. And then lot of people all—in fact, the workers and all—we were young yet and we had to help fix the pipe. Just about four days ago, one of these guys who used to work in there, he was telling some guys about—they was asking about this 1946 tidal wave, you know. I was there. See this person, he said, "Oh yes. We carry those pipes on our shoulders then." That was a lie. He said sixteen-inch pipe. No man can carry sixteen-inch pipe. Those biggest pipes that we had up there was eight inch. Eight-inch pipe diameter, about sixteen feet long. No man can put them on their shoulder, no way. But I never like tell that guy, "Ey, that guy is all wet because no man can do that." I no care what they say.

But we did carry those pipes with a sling, two men on each side. We had about three. So I tell them we had about oh, twelve, fourteen guys on one pipe, with the sling. Then we can move those sixty inch—I mean the length of sixty, we can move them, easy we go then we can set them up. That's the only way we can move—of course, they had one bulldozer, too, can help along. But you never can put them on your shoulder, no way. And he was telling—I tell, "Oh, I don't

know how the guy can talk like that.” Because if they only figure, nobody can put an eight-inch [in diameter pipe] on them and carry. Because the thing was about sixteen feet long. No man can do that.

JJ: What about the cleanup of the housing? Did the military come and help with the cleanup?

EL: No, that part I don’t know too much whether they came in to do the moving of this. But we did a lot of work by ourselves to move some things back because we had some good workers here. So that tidal wave was mostly all I can remember because when I was—like I said, I was working. I never see too much. Going be other people going tell you more stories because that’s how much I can remember, the working part inside Waikolu for the water line and what I saw that day. But some other people saw better because they came down the beach while I was here working in there. I was busy.

JJ: How did things change after the tidal wave?

EL: Change in what way?

JJ: Was there any change in the community here after the tidal wave because of the ocean? Or did you feel funny about the ocean after that?

EL: No, but we always thought that whenever they said high water, we always think about the pipeline going to break up again. It does, even the rocks from the—falling down and then we have to go inside once in a while to fix up those pipes. But not at my time, at that stage, no. Because when we started to make a new line in there, then I started work inside. I think that was in the [19]70s, I think, [19]70s. So you know, that’s when we started. But that’s all I know too much about. . . . I don’t know too much about the tidal wave. That’s all I can remember, working hard inside there. That’s about it.

But I never like to go back to Honolulu. I wanted to stay here. This was the place, this what we call paradise for us. We really enjoyed it. They even gave us time to spend up at Kalalau. When we get through schooling, we would belong to the Boy Scout. So they got to stay up there for three months, Boy Scouts, camping up at Kalalau. It was a camping ground for us. We pitch about three tents. I think we had about thirty members. And we were called the Troop 46, we call that. And then we were taught, even how young we were, we were taught how to cook everything on the open stove. There was one scout master who take two of us with him and he teach us how to cook the rice and all open fire. We got to go get wood and everything. Then they teach us. Once we know how, he give us a test and then we do it ourselves. Oh, those days was wonderful. We’d go hunting and catch those wild goats and everything. Those were the days, the best days of my life. I enjoyed, at that time.

JJ: Do you do any hunting anymore?

EL: Not anymore. I’m too old for that already. Even the gathering, the gathering of the *’opihis* and going fishing to Wainoa, my legs not as strong. I’m seventy years old now.

JJ: Really?

EL: I’m seventy. Seventy years old, that’s why I don’t fool around with those things. I know when I’m not, you know. But I’m retired, my wife was retired also and then she got cancer. She just

passed away in the year 1996 she passed on. So just about two years now. So I'm by myself now, not planning to do anymore (laughs) looking for anybody. That's the end for that. I just want to stay like this, I enjoy myself.

I go to Honolulu quite often and I go up there, meet new friends. I make new friends and I just enjoy outside. I used to go about two, three days and then I come back because I have my animals to take care. Somebody does the caring for me.

Kalaupapa has been wonderful for me because I would say I think I owe everything to God because till today, he has been the provider for me. I believe that. I really believe that all the blessings I have today, is from him. So my aim right now, I just doing this right at this stage, my aim is to help others. Whatever I can, I do. Whether financial or whatever, any help I can do, I would do it because I feel this is part of God's work. Whatever you get too much, you share with other people and then that's how I feel. To share. And I believe in that because the more I gave, I got more come back. That's God's truth. I don't know why, but people tell me that's how it works. And oh, I tell you, the more I give, I can't believe I getting more. I say, "What I going do with all this?" So I keep giving out again. I really enjoyed my life, whatever. Of course, I feel lonely for my wife because I really loved her. I stayed with her till the end. A whole year God gave me with her. Of course she was suffering and all that, but I stayed with her. Helped her all I can, until the final end. Oh, it was a terrible loss but I got over it. I got over it. I figure my life got to go on.

I start crying, they say, "Hey, you know, got plenty gals out there."

I said, "No, that's not for me." If I stay like this, I can do the things I like. Like I can go Honolulu anytime I like. Nobody going tell me you stay back. I can do anything what I want. So I'm so thankful, like I said.

And the state over here takes good care of us. They provide us with our food, our housing. Mostly everything. I get no kick against our state. People, some of them, they said, "Oh, the state owe us this." The state don't owe us nothing. Whatever we have, be thankful. I am. I no see why they not thankful because they give us free food, they give us housing, they give us medical. Help us. *Chee*, what more you want? That's what I feel, I'm so blessed so whatever I have, that's why I want to share. I believe in sharing. That's God's way.

And I really came—part Christian more strong, when I lost my wife. That's when I return, I turned to God. Because while she was sick, I did turn to God. That's how I found God, I'll be honest. Because when she wasn't sick, my, have a good time. Go down to bar enjoy, don't go home till late and all that. Really enjoy. But ever since she got sick, I put away all that. I told her, "Hey, I give up drinking."

Oh, she was so happy. So God gave me, like I said, God gave me a whole year. I stayed with her, right till the end. And at that time, that's when I turned to God because I was in trouble. I was in trouble so that's why I had to turn to somebody and that's how I find God.

You know the strangest part? You got to be hurt before you find God. Something got to be taken away from you before you find God. Otherwise, you have everything, you care less. So this is Edwin Lelepali again, and talking to . . .

JJ: Jeanne.

EL: . . . Jeanne and then thank you very much for this short talk.

JJ: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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