BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: JOSE CORPUZ, ILWU Ethnic Relations Director

Jose Corpuz, Filipino, was born in Vigan, Ilocos Sur on July 2, 1924. He graduated from high school in the Philippines. In June of 1946 he and his wife immigrated to Hawaii on one of the last ships bringing Filipino laborers. His wife had their first baby during the height of the 1946 strike.

Jose was assigned to Waialua. He worked in the mill and later in the Agriculture Department for a year. He became active in the union in 1946 as a steward. For over 25 years, he has been a union official.

He and his wife are the parents of six grown children. The Corpuzes live in Kawaiola.
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Jose Corpuz (JC)

ILWU Office, Honolulu, Hawaii

June 7, 1976

BY: Gael Gouveia (GG)

GG: This is an interview with Jose Corpuz in his office on June 7, 1976. He's the Ethnic Relations Director for ILWU. Okay, how about start maybe by telling me about when you were getting ready to come to Hawaii and the experiences that you had. How did you decide to come?

JC: Well, to start with, first of all the war in the Philippine Islands is about to end up and the last stand of the Japanese was the mountain on our side because you still can hear the airplanes dropping the bombs and the strafing of the side of the mountain. That was the last stand of Yamashita, General Yamashita. And it was somewhere around October I think of 1945 when they started the campaign to recruit people to come and work to Hawaii but the people didn't take it seriously because they felt that it's just a gimmick of trying to draft people, the young boys, to carry ammunition to go up the mountains. Not until the first batch that arrive in Hawaii that it's just like a gold rush, that they believe that they actually coming to Hawaii. Well, in general, I'm not speaking for all the people in there but in general. People made up their mind that if they could come to Hawaii there would be a big change in their way of living if they are physically, mentally able to work in Hawaii. I think that was the major thought of all the people, the young people really came to Hawaii. And also our home town, that's the capital of Ilocos Sur, they also have that old Spanish building. It's about two or three stories high. I didn't even realize the name itself; it says "Parahawai." Now "Para" means in what is Spanish, is a starting point. So as a kid we only read it as one word, "Parahawai," not realizing until the last HSPA recruit came down to Vigan. Now there's lots of things that I experienced down there. Well, first of all they encouraged the younger Filipinos to come to Hawaii. And then we do have some middle-age qualified to fifty of working in Hawaii and who had experienced coming back again to Hawaii. What surprises us was the rigged questioning of those younger boys. They look at you from the shoes to the hair and they asked questions like, "If you know how to read and write, you went to school; how far you went to school?" And for my own self, it's something that I would not forget. And maybe it's a blessing like the old slang in Hawaii, "Lucky come Hawaii" because finally I made up my mind. By the table, they have two Filipinos. One is a recording secretary and the other is a secretary assisting the HSPA representative that is the late Mr. Robert Trent. He is the HSPA secretary who was heading the
hiring of people coming to Hawaii. So it is just unbelievable what happened to me because I don't know anything about Hawaii. So they ask me if I know how to read and write, after looking at me from foot to head. (Trails off in laughter) And they ask me if I know how to read and write and I told 'em, "Yeah." How far I went, I told him. And he just ask one last question. "Do you think you can work in Hawaii?" I told him, "I can work because I'm a son of a working man." "Get out from the line, we don't need you." About thousands of people. And right behind me is a school teacher. I don't know what he was doing, if he was listening to our conversation. Mr. Trent asked him, "Occupation, sir?" "School teacher." "We don't need school teacher. Get out from the line." Just like that. So I went across the street. It's as wide as this street (Atkinson Drive in front of ILWU office). A little bit wider. Then it happened, I was standing by a middle aged man and he asked me, "Son, do you know why they never take you?" "I don't know." "What did they ask you?" "Oh, they asked me if I know how to read and write." "And what did you tell them?" "Oh, I told them I went to school, I finish high school, I finish high school." Then all of a sudden he said, "That is the biggest mistake you made." So I look at him, shocked, "What do you mean?" "Well, you have to take my word. I'm an ex-Hawaiian man. They don't want people who answer back." How can that be? You cannot communicate with them. That is what they wanted. So it's really hard for me to really accept it. Then I'd say about almost 45 minutes, I look back at the line and I saw this school teacher about five feet away from the table again. At this time, we have to rub our hands against the dirt, against the wall. Most buildings in there are made Spanish style, got bricks. They had to see your hand. Smooth you get out right away. Looking back on the table, I saw this school teacher. When his turn comes, they ask him few questions. He made believe that he doesn't know anything about school or reading. So the Filipino secretary had to come up. "That haole is asking if you went to school." The teacher replied, "This is why I can't understand him because I never go to school. I can write my name only." See, just like that, they gave him the application paper. My house is just about two or three blocks away. I went home to change clothes. When I went back before lunch, the haole was not there. We just have the Filipino but they remember me because I stay there too long arguing with them.

(JG laughs)

JC: So they said, "We cannot take a chance because the American might recognize you and we might lose our jobs." So I lost my head. I told them, "I know you people. I live here. I was raised in here and I can bring about ten people that are being bribed, that bribes you and only three of them are qualified because you assure them that they can go to Hawaii." You have to get medical examination, physical examination and the last one is the X-ray exam. This is where they flunk. I cannot reach first base with them. So lunch time, Spanish style, the Filipinos take a siesta. After lunch that's when they take a short nap, and I went up to see my cousin who is a cashier. I told him my problem. I'm not asking anything except
an application. So we went looking for the two guys. So one guy says, "Oh, I'm just the secretary, okay? I'm just the recording secretary." I told them again. They know me very well. That's when I threaten them. "All I'm asking is give me an application." They told me to see them at 1:30. That is when they are to go back to work. So I got that application and that is how I got in. I passed the medical examination, physical examination. The last one is the X-ray. Now, the biggest problem of the Filipinos was that they had so many alias names. During the two last shipment. That is when they were trying to cut down, you know, those younger Filipinos who went to school. They found out that on the second or third batch, they don't last long in the plantation. They run away. In order to hold them back, they said only married people. So when you apply they ask you if you're married. I said, "Yes." Then they will ask you next, "Are you willing to take your wife in Hawaii?" You have to say yes or no. If no, you are disqualified. Last, they have also these so called orders from relatives.

If I have relatives (father, brother, nephew) in Hawaii, all I have to do is to ask them to order me. They would contact management to do the processing of papers through the HSPA. If your relatives are good workers, their request for order most likely will be granted. Orders have first priority over other applicants.

GG: Did you have any relatives?

JC: I don't have anybody. Or else I don't have the trouble in going through. Now this is where they get these problems on these alias names. Some of these men who had order paper changed their mind. They do not want to go. Some of them sold their papers for two hundred pesos or more. Those who went through and were disqualified, their order papers were collected and sold for profits by employees working in the office. Those who were qualified and later changed their mind sold their papers five hundred pesos or more. They hear the wife crying or the children crying, then they lose their feelings of leaving their family and they just give up and say, "Anybody want to buy papers?" At that time they don't use any pictures so they don't care as long as they have papers. So this is where we have most of these aliases that they are having problems. I never borrow my paper or else I would have been out of this country because in the early days of the ILWU, especially during the height of Communism, you are not being sued for what you're doing but what they think you're thinking.

GG: So did you buy papers? Is that how you finally...

JC: No, no, no. I didn't. I went through. I ask for an application. That's when I went to see the cashier of the HSPA and explained to him I need his help. We went to look for the two guys, and this two guys blame one another. One said, "I'm just a secretary." Other said, "I'm just a recording secretary." That is when I told them, "Look, I know you people. You're being bribed and I can bring people to prove to you that you're being bribed. Seven of them were rejected. Only three pass the X-ray and I know that. I can bring them in here. I'm not gonna bribe you people. All I'm
asking you people is to give me an application. That's all."

GG: And you were 17 at that time? How old were you?

JC: No, I was 21.

GG: 21.

JC: They only take people that is twenty and above.

GG: Well, why did you want to come so much though, 'cause it seems like you really fought to come, you know...

JC: Well, it's just a matter of trying to take a wild chance at that time. I'm just talking of looking in the future. Philippine Islands, you have to know somebody to work for the government. I know that because my uncle has been a governor for three terms, 1922 (to) '26. Then he became a congressman for two times. Then he lose faith in politics, and gave up. He was appointed judge until he passed away. And his son was number five when they have the national bar examination with Marcos. Marcos was number one. You have to know somebody in the government in order to work. They don't have any work opportunities in there.

GG: And how was it then when you finally got on the boat? How was the crossing and what kind of accommodations did you have on the boat and how were you treated...?

JC: On the boat you eat only twice. One at 10 o'clock. And 3 o'clock. But for us who know the people who work in the ship, we eat five times. For those who work in the boat, they work regular. They eat three times. Breakfast, lunch and dinner normally. We eat two times daily.

GG: And how long does the trip take?

JC: Gee, I guess it takes quite some time. The name of the boat was SS Mauauuli. And I was told that boat was being used as a supply ship for the servicemen during the second World War. It's not actually a boat that is made for people to travel. While we are in the boat we are organized by the union workers in the boat who have good relationship with the ILWU. And at that time it was already the height of organizing of the ILWU on the sugar plantation.... when we dock in Port Allen and Honolulu, they already have a management representative, talking to you.

GG: So you went directly to Waialua?

JC: Yes, I was assigned to Waialua.

GG: Do you know how or why you got sent there?

JC: Well, I don't know how. To be honest I didn't sign the union dues check off because I don't even know where I'm going. I said, "Where are they going to collect my union dues?" They signed up about ninety percent of those people. They told us the working conditions
in Hawaii. It's really hard to believe in a country where we always call land of opportunity. Because we didn't even know how far the slavery was in. All we know about slavery is just selling those people but not how they are being treated and how they are being discriminated. So when I arrive in 1946, I was approached by those top organizers with the ILWU to serve as a steward for that gang, the newly arrived, the last one. That was in 1946. And then in 1947, first election I had in the union, I was elected as the Steward's Head for the whole camp.

GG: This was Kawaiola?

JC: Yes, Kawaiola. And then at the same time, too, I was elected as president of the Kawaiola Filipino community. That is as big as Waialua community at that time.

GG: Was that pretty fast movement for you since you were here only one year or...

JC: Well, this is the only pride that I had because I had my roots on the bottom which I had establishing. Then in 1948 I was elected in the union as a Steward Council chairman. They call it in the early days the Camps' Stewards' Head.

GG: But now you came in June of 1946. Okay now, the big strike was in November of 1946.

JC: September was, I think.

GG: September. Now what was your involvement or role?

JC: Well, in those days since I had a family, they made sure that hardship cases would be allowed to work in sanitation or where it affects the health of the employees. We were one of those permitted to work. It's better for us to work instead of letting you out in the streets (picket line), and then they will supply you with milk for the kids.

GG: So you actually, then, worked during the period of the strike?

JC: During the period of the strike, more than fifty percent, they have to rotate the people. Then at the same time, too, I go in and put in some hours picketing weekends and after eight hours in the afternoon because we have a picket house in every block. That is well organized in 1946.

GG: Now as far as the union was concerned... did you help get more people to join during the strike, or when things were already pretty organized?

JC: Well, no. Not exactly. We keep on going through the various segments of the community where we know that there are undecided people. We try to relate the message that we have to be united in
order to achieve our goal. Because it takes so many years before we finally had in the contract that everybody must be in the union. The biggest strike was in 1958. That's when we broke the camel's back. That is when the employers agreed that the union is here to stay to bargain for the rights of the working people.

GG: So they really didn't feel that way in 1946, after that strike?

JC: Who?

GG: Well, did the union feel that it was here to stay at that point?

JC: Well, that is our objective; to be here, to be recognized.

GG: And how did the plantation management react at that time?

JC: Well, if they can ignore its leadership, they want to deal with the members. This is why we have consolidation and this is where we had only one negotiation. Before, we have company by company. Then the company realize at that time that company by company... negotiation will not work. They know they cannot break the union. They are better off if they negotiate as one. Because once you make that contract statewide, that is it. So going back to my arrival in 1946, I was appointed Steward of the gang, '47, elected Camp Steward chairman of the Kawailoa Filipino Community Association. '48, I was elected in (Steward) Council chairman. In 1949, I was elected treasurer of the union. In 1950, I was elected as vice chairman of the union. Then in 1951, that's the first time I run for the top. That's when I lose. I lose by about 28 votes. The unit board don't want to lose me, so they appointed me a member of the board of trustees. Then from 1952, on I run for full time job. From 1952 to 1963, I was elected the business agent representing sugar. We still got Kahuku, Waialua, Waipahu, Ewa and C and H (California and Hawaii Sugar Company). Aiea. In 1947, that's when Honolulu plantation was liquidated, so from '52 on to '63, I was a sugar business agent. From '64 until last year, I was the Oahu Division Director. The Oahu Division Director is the top administrator of this island. This is the biggest division. Last year I changed my mind. I withdraw my nomination for vice-president. The newspaper said that I miss my petition for Oahu Division Director. That is not so. You know, once I give my word—and most of the guys running for that position, four of them have been under me— I gave my word I'm not going to run.

GG: Well, going back to like in 1946, were you ever personally worried about losing your job even though the union was getting stronger? Were there residue problems where...

JC: You mean when I lost my job at Waialua? I didn't have any thinking at all of losing the job. I don't because, there's lots of work at the time to be done. I learned as one of the top official...I was told then that the union was against recruiting Filipinos from the Philippine Islands. They suggested to the HSPA people, they suggested
to the government that they are not going to recruit Filipinos to work in Hawaii. They ask management to sacrifice and pay them overtime while these people are coming back slowly from the service because at that time, sugar and pineapple is the main industry in the state of Hawaii, territory then. But the company have different objective. One is to break the move of organization. They thought the Filipinos were starving to death so that they won't listen to anyone...

GG: Union riffraff.

(Laughter)

JC: Yes, that is true. So for us to come in here, it's hard to believe even though we come from the rugged country after the second World War. It's hard to believe so we stick with the old folks and fought for better conditions. If I'm not mistaken, we have a contract with HSPA, 55 cents an hour. After the first strike wages went up to 45 to fifty cents an hour.

GG: And now that was still with the perquisites. Perquisites were changed over after, you know...

JC: No, it was on the second or third negotiation when they were telling us, the houses are free, water free, electricity free. But that was not so. Those things were all converted to cash. We pay our lights and water. But not much. Only dollar fifty cents a month. And for a single man was one dollar fifty cents a month. And for a single man was one dollar a month.

GG: Now when did you---you're actually an employee of the union now.

JC: 1952.

GG: That's when you...

JC: That's when I was elected by the people to represent them. I was paid by the union or by the rank and file.

GG: And so what was the last job that you actually had on the plantation?

JC: Oh, I was in the Agriculture Department, Junior Agriculture worker. What we do is test what kind of variety of cane that grow in the higher land or lower land and what soil and all that stuff and what is good for certain variety. Then what chemicals to use to kill weeds and more effective that won't harm the sugar cane or human being. That's the main part of the job.

GG: Then it was in 1952 that you in essence left the plantation...

JC: That's right.

GG: But now you're still living in Kawailoa. Did you buy your house?

JC: Not, technically, I'm still an employee of Waialua. If I lost the election or don't have a job in the union, I still can go back to
the plantation. My seniority is frozen.

GG: But you haven't been back as an employee of the plantation since 1952! Oh, for heaven's sake!

JC: This is the 25th year for me as an official.

GG: But that's written into the contract; that's why your seniority was frozen...

JC: Yes. In our contract there is a provision in there that allow union leave. The union leave applies for temporary and full time. Temporary is if you are a secretary-treasurer of the unit in Wai'Alua and they have a treasurer's seminar for three days. All you have to do is write a letter to the company asking for a request for John Doe for three days leave of absence for union business. So all, like in my case, as a Division Director last year, if I would need you for one month as a full time business agent then I would write a letter to the company that I need you to work full time for one month without losing any of your seniority. So when you finish your work or I don't need you, then you can always go back to your old job. If you are a mechanic or a machinist, they would put somebody in there as a temporary. This is how we operate in the union.

GG: That's why you can still live in your house then?

JC: That's right. And I'm still a plantation employee.

GG: Sounds interesting. I hadn't realized that. Can you tell me anything about the period when the Communism scare, the Red Scare---that was in the 50's I think, when the union was...

JC: That was in 1959. Nobody even come into the front of the building. Nobody even want to talk to us. You see the politicians, they come from behind.

(GG laughs)

JC: Ah, if you have a chance to read that--I don't know exactly the title of it--where Dan Inouye was involved in it. It's really a long struggle. The FBI---our main office at that time was not the local now. It was that Lee Building, next to the old Hawaii Bank. I think the old Hawaii Bank was right by the corner of Farrington and California in Wahiawa. They have a market on the bottom. We rented about three or four rooms. We moved late 1954 this side. We have all these people coming in here. They said that they are from the FBI. But not one talk to me, but we see them. It's really tough. And this is why I have to delay my application for citizenship because if you subscribe to the Honolulu Record, they just tell you that we will call on you, don't call us. To open the contract you have to notify them not earlier than 75 days before the expiration, and not later than sixty days. Every time we open the contract, the next thing you see on the front page is Communism. The ordinary rank and file say, "Every time they
talk about Communism we get better wages." Because there is the old saying like a broken record.

These people are being educated. Because I like myself, I'm honest enough, and I learn the hard way. I deal with the lawyers and this is how I get some of my legal experiences...like divorce cases, gambling cases, traffic cases, immigration, because we do ILMU work with the lawyers. And this is how we pick it up. But that is not all. They will ask you next because they will plant stooges inside. They said, "Look, while you were going to school, do you know a guy by the name of so and so" and all that stuff. "Do you know that he was a Communist?" But for me personally, not one did approach me. And we tell the rank and file this....we try to define what is Communism. We have to tell them that as far as we know, the meaning of Communism is either an individual or a group or an organization whose objective is to overthrow the present government by force and violence. Now if that is the true meaning of Communism, then let us know, did we ever tell you to train and carry arms? You know, our movements in those days compared to these people of the bombing ones, the Weatherman, the Symbionese Army Organization, we are drop the bucket. Yeah, we are drop in the bucket.

GG: Well, that is 'cause we said a lot of small organizations today like the ones you mentioned have labels, but not communist labels.

JC: Yeah.

GG: And yet at that time, they would really have been...(Laughs)

JC: It takes you over, they watch you. Some of our people were really so scared. The local people are worried. "You Filipinos, you people don't care because if you guys are sent home you guys have a place to go home and work." But that is not so. I have nothing to hide because if that is the true interpretation of the word "Communism" we never did say one word about "Let's mobilize and overthrow the government." The only thing is they said our thinking is bad, that's all. Everyone, the rank and file, they support us because that is the whole truth. "You go down there, you have seen me. You know me." They said. Yeah. Everytime they see me come to the meeting. The times, many, many times. "Did I say anything that I was overthrowing the government? No, because we only talk about our working conditions and that is all." But man, it is really tough for the family.

GG: When you first came here, did you have thoughts about eventually going back to the Philippines or...

JC: Well, it's really frightening because we do have neighbors that come from other counties, no other islands or other province as we call them. And when you hear them talk you don't want to come, because they look at you and they can tell. They ask you, "Are you going to Hawaii, too?"
"Yes." "You'll be sorry." They are honest enough they tell you that you are not a farm boy, so you will regret it. Then they tell us their story. Some of them exaggerate too much; pineapples so big, you can carry only two, one in each hand. And sugar cane is too tall you cannot even see the sun. And then when you cut cane, even though you are twenty or thirty feet away, as long as you get one inch or two inch protruding from the ground, the Luna or supervisor happens to find out, "Hey, come back, manong." You have to come back and cut those protruding canes. "I think you will regret it." But looking at them, physically I'm a better built than those people. So I talk to my gang, "There must be something more than what you're telling us." It was a blessing that organizing was on. And that's what teach these people, and they say, "You people are lucky because we started it already." It was really a blessing. I had in mind that if that is so, then I have to work hard and save just enough money and go back and that's all. Because once you complete your three years, you have earned your free transportation to go home. That's a condition that they give you.

GG: Have you ever felt like you wished you had gone home or you still have plans maybe of someday going back home or...

JC: No, because I have my kids already in here. My only three trips are trips you don't even want to talk about. That's when in 1958 my father passed away. I returned to see him. And then '62 I lost my mother and then last November I lost my mother-in-law.

GG: So and all your kids are here and plan to stay here, so now this is home. Hawaii is home or....

JC: I get three boys and three girls. My oldest one and the only one born in the Philippine Islands, they are living at Likini, Salt Lake, not too far from Radford High School. They have four boys. My wife was pregnant when we arrive in '46. Strike baby. He will be thirty years old this coming October.

GG: Right at the time of the strike then...

JC: Yes. During the strike. October.

GG: Did she have the baby in the hospital, I assume, or....

JC: You still can go to the hospital. They don't stop you. We don't pay our medical dues. We tell them we will pay after the strike. And I have my boy, then a girl, and then the last boys. My youngest one is 22 in December.

GG: So they're all grown then?

JC: Yes.

GG: Are you a grandpa, too?

JC: Oh yes. I have seven of them.
GG: My goodness.

JC: My strike girl was married to a haole and had one girl and one boy. The oldest girl, born in P. I. (Philippine Islands) get four boys. The oldest boy will be 15 this coming July and is six feet already.

GG: Did you have any reaction when that one married haole or....

JC: I didn't have my background as a union official already.

GG: Well, especially the kind of work you do.

JC: Yeah. And then my next one, the boy, was going with Japanese. I told my family that the way I treat you is the same way I treat the rank and file. I cannot make two policies or two rules; one is different from my family and one is different from my rank and file. When my boy was going to Honolulu Business School, the girl was second year in education at Church College at that time. Now they call that Brigham Young University. So they got married. I asked them to finish their education. I'm so strict, they scared me.

"We gonna work, Pa. We gonna work." Well, we meet again tomorrow. Finally that morning they gave me the answer, "Since we are married we will work." "I don't blame you," I told them. "But once you find job let me know, get out of the house already." They decided to go back to school. So as soon as my daughter-in-law got through, she was teaching in Waialua until now. This is her eight or nine years now. So my boy finish his TAM business accounting. But he can make more money in the hotel. So I don't blame him for turning down the job at the Waialua Plantation office. I ask him to help us organize Kuilima, he was very shy. Maybe he like it better in there, he can make more money. I didn't say anything about it again. Only one point, don't push. Then his kid sister--just a year ago May 10--married a haole. They met while she's going to Brigham Young University, and the older brother treated her to dinner one night at Kuilima. I think it was her birthday. And this is how they met with the man down there. Kuilima is owned by Del Webb. They got married. The husband now is the manager of "The Mint." He take care of the casino and the food and beverage section. As usual, a combination of jobs.

END OF SIDE ONE. END OF INTERVIEW.
WAIALUA & HALEIWA

The People
Tell Their Story

Volume III
FILIPINOS

ETHNIC STUDIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAM
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