

INTERVIEW OF ELIZABETH D. RECHEBEI

by Howard P. Willens and Deanne C. Siemer

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- Siemer: Elizabeth Diaz Rechebei has kindly agreed to an interview for our history project. We are going to start, if we could, with your family and your family background. Could you tell us when and where you were born.
- Rechebei: I was born in Saipan. My mom is Japanese; my father is Chamorro.
- Siemer: What are their names?
- Rechebei: Maria Reiko Tanaka Diaz, my mom. And my father is Francisco Diaz Diaz. They met in Japan during the war, and then they came here after the war.
- Siemer: How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- Rechebei: I presently have three brothers and a sister. One passed away.
- Siemer: What are their names?
- Rechebei: My sister is Margarita. My brothers—the oldest, Edward, second Francisco, and third David.
- Siemer: Are your brothers and your sister currently living in Saipan?
- Rechebei: They're all here except one. He's in the States.
- Siemer: Tell us about your father. What did he do? What was his occupation?
- Rechebei: My father's retired right now. He used to work for the NTTU. And then he worked, I think for some time, with the Trust Territory government. He was a repairman. He repaired typewriters, Xerox machines, and all the office equipment during those days.
- Siemer: How about your mom? Did she work?
- Rechebei: She opened a business, a restaurant.
- Siemer: Where?
- Rechebei: In Chalan Kanoa.
- Siemer: And how long did she work at that?
- Rechebei: Oh, she operated that for close to 30 years.
- Siemer: What was it called?
- Rechebei: Reiko's Soba Lounge. It used to be a very popular place for the young people then, because that was one of the few restaurants or places to gather.
- Siemer: Where was your father born?
- Rechebei: Saipan.
- Siemer: And how about his parents?
- Rechebei: My grandmother was born, I think, in Guam.
- Siemer: And how about your grandfather?

- Rechebei: That's a mystery. I don't know. My grandfather is probably part Chamorro and probably part maybe Polynesian or something like that. We're still trying to track that down.
- Siemer: What did your father do before the war?
- Rechebei: He was a student in Japan. He was sent there by the Japanese government.
- Siemer: He was educated here first?
- Rechebei: Yes, and then sent to Japan.
- Siemer: So he did the full education here and then was selected to go to Japan?
- Rechebei: Right.
- Siemer: He must have been one of the very few.
- Rechebei: Yes, he was. And he was sent to, I'm not sure what kind of school that was in Japan, but it had to do with the machines.
- Siemer: When did he go to Japan?
- Rechebei: I don't know.
- Siemer: Was he there when the war broke out?
- Rechebei: Yes, and he got stuck there and couldn't come back. He came here after the war.
- Siemer: When did he and your mother get married?
- Rechebei: You know I really don't know. I have to check the dates.
- Siemer: But while they were in Japan?
- Rechebei: No. They got married here. They met in Japan and came here and got married here.
- Siemer: When did your father return?
- Rechebei: I don't know. I have to check on those dates. I actually never bothered with dates.
- Siemer: Sometime after the war?
- Rechebei: Yes. I think it was immediately after the war.
- Siemer: It's likely that the American occupying authorities in Japan would have repatriated him here if he wanted to come.
- Rechebei: It was easy to repatriate him, but not my mom. They had to go through a lot of red tape, and my mom was telling me that they even saw MacArthur to authorize it.
- Siemer: They saw General MacArthur to authorize her to come back?
- Rechebei: Yes. So she was telling me a story, but I'm not sure, you know. But it was really very difficult.
- Siemer: How did your father come to work for the NTTU?
- Rechebei: I think during those days there were very few local people who were qualified to work with machines. My father could open safes, you know. He was that good. So the banks, when the person who was in charge would be off-island and they needed something in the safe, they would call him. And he would open the safes in the banks—Bank of America, even Payless and Townhouse called him once or twice. And people who would forget their combinations would send their safe boxes to my father, and he would open them.

- Siemer: That's a good occupation to have. Was your father familiar with the real mission of the NTTU?
- Rechebei: You know, my father never really talked to us about much of anything. He wasn't much of a talker. That's my father.
- Siemer: Where were you educated?
- Rechebei: I was educated here.
- Siemer: Where did you start?
- Rechebei: I started first grade at Mt. Carmel.
- Siemer: You went all the way through at Mt. Carmel?
- Rechebei: Yes. Catholic School, all the way.
- Siemer: And then where did you go after you graduated from Mt. Carmel?
- Rechebei: I went to the University of Guam and then to the University of Hawaii.
- Siemer: What year did you graduate from Mt. Carmel?
- Rechebei: 1968.
- Siemer: When did you go to Guam?
- Rechebei: Right after, 1968.
- Siemer: Had you worked anyplace during high school?
- Rechebei: Yes. I worked for the Congress of Micronesia.
- Siemer: What were you doing there?
- Rechebei: I was a clerk, and I worked with people like Andon Amaraich, and Amata Kabua.
- Siemer: When did you start with the Congress of Micronesia?
- Rechebei: I think it was in 1964 when I was a freshman in high school. Yes, I also worked for the Trust Territory government as a summer intern in the scholarship program, in education.
- Siemer: Which office did you work in?
- Rechebei: Scholarship.
- Siemer: How many summers did you work there?
- Rechebei: I think one or two.
- Siemer: When you worked for the Congress of Micronesia, was that a part-time job during the school year?
- Rechebei: That was during the summer, and I also worked in the evenings. Yes, during the summer. I think the Congress was held during the summer then.
- Siemer: Who else was on the staff at that time?
- Rechebei: Vic Orbla and Kaleb Udui.
- Siemer: Was Herbert Del Rosario there when you were there?
- Rechebei: No.
- Siemer: How about Joe Dela Cruz?

- Rechebei: No. Jesse Borja was there when I was there. Francisco Uludong, he was a Sergeant-at-Arms. I think Joe Dela Cruz may have been a Sergeant-at-Arms at one time. Bennet Seman also worked there as a clerk. She used to be the MVB Director. She's now working with Herman Guerrero.
- Siemer: When you left and went to the University of Guam, did you work while you were going to school?
- Rechebei: I was on scholarship.
- Siemer: And then you finished two years on Guam and went to Hawaii?
- Rechebei: I finished four, and then I went to Hawaii.
- Siemer: When did you graduate from the University?
- Rechebei: 1972. The University of Guam.
- Siemer: What was your degree in?
- Rechebei: Psychology.
- Siemer: Then did you go immediately on to Hawaii?
- Rechebei: No. I worked for two years with the War Claims Commission.
- Siemer: Back here on Saipan?
- Rechebei: Yes. I was the CNMI Representative on the War Claims Commission for two years. Then I started working for the Trust Territory government in education. Then I went back to school.
- Siemer: Who was on the War Claims Commission when you worked there?
- Rechebei: Jose Cabrera was CNMI—he had a title then, like liaison person. John Roma from Yap. Those two were the island representatives. The rest were lawyers from the States, from the War Claims Commission office.
- Siemer: What years did you work at the War Claims Commission?
- Rechebei: I think 1973-74.
- Siemer: And then when did you work for the Trust Territory government?
- Rechebei: 1975. I have my resume; I should look at it. When it comes to dates, don't rely on them. I have to verify. Maybe when you send me that transcription, I can give you the dates.
- Siemer: What were you doing for the Department of Education in the TT government?
- Rechebei: After graduation from the University of Guam, I worked there as the Board of Education research assistant.
- Siemer: Who was the TT person who was in charge of the Department of Education back at that time?
- Rechebei: I think it was Dick Trace.
- Siemer: And then you decided to go on to graduate school?
- Rechebei: Yes.
- Siemer: When was that?
- Rechebei: 1974.

- Siemer: And what did you study at the University of Hawaii?
- Rechebei: Ed Psych.
- Siemer: What degree did you get?
- Rechebei: Masters in Ed Psych.
- Siemer: Then when did you come back?
- Rechebei: 1975, I think. I was under an East-West Center scholarship.
- Siemer: When you came back from Hawaii, what job did you take then?
- Rechebei: I handled several things—testing, evaluation.
- Siemer: Back at the Department of Education?
- Rechebei: Yes. Federal programs, personnel, I practically went through the whole thing.
- Siemer: Then what did you do when the Commonwealth was established? Did you stay with the TT?
- Rechebei: Yes. I stayed there until the very end, until 1987. So I don't really know much about the CNMI the daily goings-on with politics and government, because I was pretty much involved in Micronesia.
- Siemer: Were you stationed here in Saipan?
- Rechebei: Yes. But all my career was in Micronesia.
- Siemer: And at the TT government, you were always in the Department of Education?
- Rechebei: Yes.
- Siemer: Then where did you go in 1987?
- Rechebei: I got a job with the CNMI Education Office as Technical Advisor for the Commissioner, Superintendent at that time.
- Siemer: And how long did you stay there?
- Rechebei: Oh, I was there for about two years. Then I became an assistant for the Board of Education, technical assistant for the Board. Then I became Commissioner of Education. Prior to that I was Director of Education for the TT.
- Siemer: How long were you Director of Education for the TT?
- Rechebei: I think four years.
- Siemer: What years were those, approximately?
- Rechebei: 1987, 1986, 1985, 1984.
- Siemer: And then when did you become Commissioner here?
- Rechebei: 1990.
- Siemer: And served how long?
- Rechebei: I served for one and one half years.
- Siemer: And then where did you go after that?
- Rechebei: I became a private consultant, and I've been ever since.
- Willens: When were you born?

- Rechebei: 1949. September 30.
- Willens: You have spent then, beginning with those early years at the Congress of Micronesia and your later positions, a good deal of time worrying about Micronesia as a whole. I just want to ask about your recollections as to what you remember about the political status question that the Congress of Micronesia spent a good deal of time deliberating about in the late 1960s.
- Rechebei: Well, in the late 1960s I wasn't really that familiar with what was going on politically in the region for Micronesia as a whole. But later on, when I started working for the Trust Territory, and I had more involvement with all the districts, then that's when I started getting concerned. But during the 1960s, I was merely doing my work and getting to know those people. I knew about people from Micronesia because I went to high school with them for four years, with a lot of girls from all over Micronesia.
- Willens: The ones who were boarders at Mt. Carmel?
- Rechebei: Yes. Those were called residents then.
- Willens: Turning to the 1970s, then, do you recall whether you were informed that the Marianas were embarked on separate negotiations with the United States?
- Rechebei: Yes, I was aware of that development.
- Willens: It happened in 1972, and the negotiations then went on for the next two and a half years until the Covenant was signed in February of 1975. What was your reaction to the decision of the Northern Marianas and the United States to have separate negotiations?
- Rechebei: Well, I think at that time I was very much against the separation of the CNMI from the rest of Micronesia. Probably my feelings then were because of my familiarity with the other entities, the districts and the people, and having associated with them also in the schools. It's mainly the people that I had feelings about in terms of unity.
- Siemer: Was it your thinking back then that the peoples in Micronesia were close enough or similar enough that they could form a single political entity?
- Rechebei: Maybe not similar enough, but close enough, in terms of their desires and what they could do as a united group together. Because you know this is a very unique area, and we have a lot of unique groups of people here. And when you have that close characteristics, I think you should stick together and try to enhance those to benefit your people.
- Siemer: There were many people back then, particularly well-educated people, who felt the same way, that the Micronesians would be better off sticking together, given the forces arrayed around the region against them or pressing on them. Back then, did you feel that you ought to do something to try to help the objective of keeping Micronesia together?
- Rechebei: Yes I did, and I participated in some activities like the Women's Organization. I remember that they called in Pete A. [Tenorio] and some people, and we gave them a hard time. Agnes McPhetres was, I think, heading that group. And I think that was probably one of the few organizations that was against the separation of the Northern Marianas.
- Siemer: What do you remember about the group? Who were the active members?
- Rechebei: Agnes, of course. Felicidad Ogomoro. Paz Younis. Magdalena George. I'm not sure if Chailang Palacios was there.
- Siemer: How did the group come together?

- Rechebei: Well, it was a group that was organized to take care of women's concerns. Then eventually they started getting involved in political issues.
- Siemer: Who were the original organizers?
- Rechebei: I think it was Agnes McPhetres. I don't remember the others. I'm sure Agnes can tell you more about it.
- Siemer: The idea was to take care of women's concerns and then it gradually migrated to the....
- Rechebei: And the social issues then in Saipan, or the CNMI.
- Siemer: As the political status negotiations went on, what became the principal concerns among the group that you referred to?
- Rechebei: The concerns as they saw it or as I saw it?
- Siemer: As the group began to focus on it.
- Rechebei: I think it was mainly economic concerns. The CNMI, of course, wanted to pull out because the CNMI felt that they were carrying too much of a burden being a part of the united Micronesia. And the same thing with Palau and probably the same with the Marshalls. That was the general feeling that I got.
- Siemer: What did you think about that at the time?
- Rechebei: Well, I think those were legitimate reasons for them to have at the time, knowing what they knew then. But if they had known what we know now, they may not have taken that direction. But I think you know when they were focusing on the economic aspect of their respective districts, they forgot about people, the people themselves. What kind of a future they would have as a people and as Pacific islanders. I think they lost track of that, and they just started focusing on economic development. I think that was very short-sighted of them.
- Siemer: How about the people here at the time?
- Rechebei: Oh, the same.
- Siemer: It was not just the leaders who were focused on economic development?
- Rechebei: It was the people, too. A lot of the people were focused on the economic factors. I guess they couldn't help it. People are people, and they'll take care of themselves first.
- Siemer: What did you think was being lost with respect to the Pacific island culture and identity?
- Rechebei: Well, I'm not saying that anything was being lost, as far as identity or culture. Because if you go to Yap, for example, they still have a lot of their culture, and the culture changes over time, so we cannot really make any judgment over any culture. And I think people have the right to change things if they want to. But I think what you're referring to is what was lost as a result of the separation, is that what you're referring to?
- Siemer: Yes.
- Rechebei: I think exactly what I said earlier, that we could have done much better as a group in terms of the kind of people we are, Pacific islanders, and our historical connection, even though it only went back so far. But it would have been a very unique place in the world, being a united Micronesia.
- Siemer: What do you think caused the affinity here for the United States and the connection to the United States? Was it just being under the Naval Administration and seeing lots of Americans? Is that what did it?

- Rechebei: I think it was education mainly. The U.S., of course, did a great job in educating the people throughout Micronesia. Of course, people will say different things, but they did better than any previous occupation forces. They were more sincere in their effort to educate the people and make them think for themselves. So in that way, maybe the people developed that sense of affinity for the U.S. Maybe they trusted the U.S. better and they felt that they could do better by being a part of the U.S.
- Siemer: Do you think the education in the 1960s was substantively different here in the Marianas than it was, for example, in Ponape or Truk or places like that?
- Rechebei: Substantively, I wouldn't think so. The program was mainly patterned after the U.S., of course, but I think the Marianas got more attention because the [Trust Territory] headquarters was here and they had easy access to some of the officials and some resource personnel here, while the other areas suffered, especially areas like Truk and Kosrae and the Marshall Islands. Palau did much better. Yap was not really doing that well either, but Palau did quite well.
- Willens: A lot of the people that we've talked to, like you, had some portion of their education in Guam. Many people went over there for junior high school, high school, and spent some time at the University. Did you think that the ease of access to Guam and the availability of educational opportunities there had a unique impact on the people here in the Northern Marianas with respect to their future aspirations?
- Rechebei: That's an interesting question, because everybody else had the same opportunity. Palau did, Yap, the Marshalls, all the students went to Guam. Most of the leaders went to Guam. In fact, they were my classmates.
- Willens: That's true. We have heard that.
- Rechebei: Yes. So I don't think our going to school in Guam had anything to do with it. A lot of us went to the States. I think more of us [from the Marianas] went to the States. I think that may have had an impact. Some went to Hawaii. But even those in Hawaii, I don't think they were very active when it came to deciding on the political status for the CNMI. I don't recall them being active. I was active in Hawaii as part of the TT group. At that time, Cisco [Uludong] was leading the group, and we would get these U.N. people come over, and they would talk about how good they were doing and all this. And Cisco would raise hell. But I don't think the education in Guam had anything to do with it. I may be wrong.
- Willens: How about the family relationships between the Chamorros here and those in Guam? Is that a factor that was peculiar to the Northern Marianas and perhaps important in this context?
- Rechebei: In terms of our relationship with the U.S.?
- Willens: Yes.
- Rechebei: I don't think so.
- Willens: You don't think so?
- Rechebei: Yes. You might recall that Guam did not want us to be a part of them, and before then we wanted to be a part of Guam. But no, I don't think so.
- Willens: What would you personally have thought about reintegration with Guam?
- Rechebei: Oh, I am completely against it.

- Willens: Then and now?
- Rechebei: Yes.
- Willens: I'm just marching through some of the thoughts that have been articulated by others, and one last point goes to the mobility that comes with U.S. citizenship. A lot of people emphasized the desire to be able to move in and out of the mainland with a U.S. passport and identified that as something that was important to them personally.
- Rechebei: I think that's a great privilege that we all have as U.S. citizens. But on the other hand, mobility throughout the world is getting easier. It's not only with the U.S.; it's also with Asia. And perhaps we can have better access with Asia because we're part of the U.S. But I think eventually things will be so open that our relationship with the U.S. would have no bearing at all. But mainly, then, that was something that people kept in the back of their minds, that if you are part of the U.S. you can have access to all of these things. They were only focusing on the U.S.; they were not focusing on the rest of the world. And I think right now we should look at Asia and the rest of Europe and not only the U.S. So I think people's minds will start changing in terms of affiliation with the United States. At least that's what I think; maybe I'm wrong.
- Siemer: How did the women's group that you were a part of get information about the status negotiations and what was going on?
- Rechebei: Oh, they would just go directly to the source, and ask for information.
- Siemer: Were you comfortable that you knew what was going on and that you had accurate information about the negotiations?
- Rechebei: I never really thought about that, about the accuracy of the information that we had.
- Siemer: Were people like Eddie and Pete A. [Tenorio] and Ben Santos and others open when you would ask them questions?
- Rechebei: I remember Pete was very open, as usual. Eddie, I don't really recall what he said. He didn't really impress me at all. But Pete, of course, was impressive. We were against him then.
- Siemer: What did you think back then about the proposal to dedicate a large portion of Tinian's land to a military lease?
- Rechebei: I thought that was very inconsiderate of the U.S., and that's putting it very mildly. You know, I think the U.S. should not go around appropriating land for any purpose. They could come to an agreement on the use of land for certain occasions like times of war, but they shouldn't just say we will have it now and we'll keep it forever in case of war or in case of some international crisis.
- Siemer: Did you think back then that they would actually build a base?
- Rechebei: Yes.
- Siemer: Were you concerned about the impact that a base would have?
- Rechebei: Of course, yes.
- Siemer: Then you must be concerned about the impact that gambling initiative will have.
- Rechebei: Yes, the influx of different kinds of people that gambling will bring in. As well as the influx of people that we're having right now. But again, this is a choice we made. We made a choice as a democratic government. That's the unfortunate thing about it, you know, as a democratic government, you have to go by the majority.

- Siemer: Were you here during the campaign prior to the plebiscite on the Covenant?
- Rechebei: No, I think I wasn't here.
- Siemer: How about during the Constitutional Convention? Were you here then?
- Rechebei: Yes, I was here.
- Siemer: Did you go to any of the Constitutional Convention sessions?
- Rechebei: Yes, I did.
- Siemer: What was your impression of the quality of the people who had been elected to that Convention?
- Rechebei: Oh, for the most part they were qualified. They had experience, and I think they had good intentions.
- Siemer: When you listened to the Constitutional Convention, were you concerned about particular issues or particular directions that they were taking back then?
- Rechebei: I was involved in education then, and I think that was the time when they were discussing the autonomy of the education [governing structure]. I was a little bit concerned about making education an autonomous agency. I was not in favor of that. The spirit of the times was that everybody wants to be autonomous. And even now. But no, I wasn't really in favor of an autonomous education department.
- Siemer: How do you think that the system that came out of the First Constitutional Convention worked out?
- Rechebei: I think it worked very well, except for education maybe, and the Article 12 thing. Maybe they should have been more precise in coming out with the broad aspects of Article 12.
- Siemer: The specific guidelines?
- Rechebei: Yes. Because I think we are beginning to see problems coming up now, and I don't know how we're going to resolve these.
- Willens: What kind of problems are you referring to?
- Rechebei: Well, I'm thinking about some of our relatives in Guam are probably going to come here and claim land. Some people who grew up in Guam but have parents here or grandparents or great-grandparents born here, they are planning to come here and claim some of the land as part of their inheritance. I think the Constitutional Convention should have checked the land records before they even started making decisions on anything.
- Siemer: To make sure that Chamorros from Guam could not come here and make claims?
- Rechebei: Not that, but to make sure that the records are clear and that they would not be causing any confusion in the future. Because we go by records now, and some of them probably will open up a can of worms in the near future.
- Siemer: Well, you must remember that from your experience with the War Claims Commission, all the difficulty with the land records for those purposes.
- Rechebei: Right. Not only that, but even now, people are becoming more interested in land, and everybody is trying to get a piece of land here. It's going to be a major problem.
- Siemer: Back in those days, the Trust Territory operated with basically a Department of Education that was in the Executive Branch, that was not autonomous at all.
- Rechebei: Yes.

- Siemer: Was it to get away from that model that there was pressure on the First Constitutional Convention to create this Board of Education and to try to do it differently?
- Rechebei: No, not really. They were not really thinking about the TT model at all. I think that was the farthest thing from their mind. I think what they were trying to do was get control. It really boils down to control, and getting away from political interference. But I don't believe in that.
- Siemer: Has that been successful in your view, having an independent agency? Does that get rid of political influence?
- Rechebei: No. In fact, it's even worse as an independent agency.
- Siemer: Having lived through that yourself, you must know.
- Rechebei: Yes. I've been a board member when it was still a part of the Executive Branch here. I was a board member. And then I became Commissioner when it became an independent agency. In fact, I wrote the autonomy plan for PSS. I really analyzed the whole process, and when people ask me about it now I can say that it's not a good move, it wasn't a good move to make education an autonomous agency.
- Willens: What do you think have been the consequences?
- Rechebei: I think there's a lot of fighting between the Executive and the Board of Education, and a lot of those [problems] could have been resolved if the Governor had more control. And I'm not saying this because the Governor wants the control, but I think a Governor of any country must have a major involvement in education, and if his hands are tied, all he can do is react. If he wants to initiate a program, he has to go through political bodies such as the Board of Education. I call it political bodies because they were elected. But a lot of things could have been done much better if the Governor had some say in many of the problems now that are coming up.
- Willens: When you were in the Trust Territory government in the early 1970s before you went back to Hawaii and then when you came back after Hawaii, did you have any sense of how people in the Trust Territory Administration felt about the separate Marianas status situation?
- Rechebei: I think they were in favor of it. I think they had something to do with it.
- Willens: The people in the TTPI Administration?
- Rechebei: Yes, I think so. At least the U.S. people there. There were lots of Micronesian leaders then working in the Trust Territory. I don't know what they thought, but I really think the U.S. government had a lot to do with the separation of the Marianas.
- Willens: In your work later on in the Trust Territory when you went to the other districts, what was your impression then about the extent to which the traditional tribal organizations still were an important factor in the life of those communities?
- Rechebei: Well, I'm not really sure I can speak about that with great detail. But I think in the Marshalls, for example, the traditional leaders had a lot of control. In fact, they still have. But then they almost dictated the lives of the people who were living on their properties. Just ranking traditional chiefs owned the properties then, the lands. Maybe they still do. In Yap, it's a little bit more mysterious for me, but they still have a lot of traditional respect, and they go by what the chiefs ask them to do. Palau is kind of different from the rest of the Micronesian entities, because they were more aggressive in terms of moving forward. They wanted to do new things, but the traditional leaders still had a lot of impact, because

they still owned a lot of land. In Koror, for example, the Ibidul now owns a lot of land there and all major investments have to go through him. People have to sort of rent land from him or lease land from him. So it's a different situation. People are coming in from the main island of Palau, Babelthau, to Koror. And by staying in Koror, they would be beholden to that chief of Koror. Going back to your question, yes, they still have a lot of control.

Siemer: How would you compare that to the situation in the Marianas in the early 1970s? Were there any traditional leaders here who had comparable influence?

Rechebei: No. In the Northern Marianas, the only force that we had then was the Church, I think, and the people who are loyal to the Church, you know, church-goers. At that time we had a Mayor. He was highly respected. I remember him—Benavente. But no dynamic leader that would lead us into some kind of a good political order.

Siemer: Not people who owned a lot of land that people were beholden to?

Rechebei: No. These were just individuals who got the respect of the people not because of any traditional background or anything like that. We lost all that way back.

Willens: How about the Carolinian community?

Rechebei: I can't really speak for the Carolinian community. They all have their spokesman and the chief of the group. I think they would follow their leader, their traditional leader. They go by the clan system, so each clan would have its own traditional leader.

Siemer: When you and other members of the women's group were looking at the Covenant and the change in status back in 1973-74, what were the things about the Covenant that troubled you the most?

Rechebei: The permanency of the Covenant, that troubled me a great deal, to be tied to the United States forever. I kept thinking about it, even now, that we shouldn't be tied to anybody. We should be on our own. And if the time comes for us to decide on a new political status, we should do it and be independent. I don't see why we have to affiliate with anybody.

Siemer: How do you think that would have developed if there had been no permanent tie?

Rechebei: Well, we wouldn't have U.S. citizenship, but I think the rate of development would be slower than what it is now. But at least we would still be in control.

Siemer: Would that be a benefit to have slower economic development?

Rechebei: I would think so, yes, in terms of the quality of life, our economic development vs. quality of life. I would think so.

Siemer: Were there other things about the Covenant that troubled you back then?

Rechebei: Yes, the separation of the people throughout Micronesia. The fact that that led to the separation, or that's a consequence of the separation.

Siemer: Was there anything that the Micronesian leaders could have done back then, do you think, to satisfy the Marianas and keep them together? There were some very skilled people like Andon Amaraich and Tosiwo Nakayama and people like that. They seemed to be very skilled leaders. Was there anything they could have done to keep the Marianas together with the rest of Micronesia?

Rechebei: I don't think they could have done anything, except to probably give the Marianas the opportunity to leave the group forever. And that's something they wouldn't give. For example, Truk, where Andon is from, the population is big and they have a lot of needs,

and as I said the Marianas tend to think that we're carrying the burden for everybody. So I don't think the leaders then would have had any way of convincing the Marianas unless they agreed on a tax formula where the Marianas would get what they produce and it goes back to them.

Siemer: You think back in those days that was just politically not feasible for the leaders in Micronesia to do that?

Rechebei: No, that would have been politically feasible for everybody to do it. I think it was the economics that was driving everybody to decide as they did.

Willens: You remember that the Marshall Islands were claiming that they wanted to retain the lease payments for the Kwajalein missile facility.

Rechebei: Right. They didn't want to share it with the rest of Micronesia. The same with us, and the same with Palau. And probably Ponape is doing the same thing now with the FSM, so poor Truk is out there somewhere.

Willens: Stepping back from it now 20 years later, do you still think that they could have stayed together if people had acted in a different way and that would have been in everyone's interest?

Rechebei: Acted in a different way by letting the Marshalls have what they want and letting us have what we want?

Willens: Does that seem to you to be a feasible realistic possibility?

Rechebei: Well, if the FSM was willing to carry their own burden, then and now, then it would have been possible.

Siemer: That would have resulted in substantially different living standards though, wouldn't it—for the Marshalls, for the Marianas, and then for Truk?

Rechebei: Yes, but then you know that wasn't the point there, the living standards.

Willens: It was not the point?

Rechebei: Yes. I don't think so. I think they just wanted to take care of themselves, and based on that they decided to separate. Oh, I see what you mean. Maybe I'm a little bit confusing here. We were concerned about our own living standard. We were not concerned about the living standard in Truk, for example.

Siemer: And had everyone stayed together, the living standards inexorably would have gotten farther and farther apart if, indeed, the Marianas were able to keep their own resources.

Rechebei: Well, that's hard to say. Who knows? Truk and the other FSM countries would have become much better. They have a lot of control over their water. They have resources in the water. And back then, they could have developed that resource. So, you know, giving them the initiative to take care of themselves would have been probably a better thing to do than giving them Uncle Sam's money for a long time. It's hard to tell.

Siemer: What did you think back then of the idea of having a plebiscite after the Covenant was negotiated, to have the people approve that status in that format?

Rechebei: I wasn't thinking much about it then. I thought that was the standard procedure.

Siemer: Did people have enough time to think about that?

Rechebei: People never have enough time to think about that. I don't think there was enough time for any of the political education for anybody in the region. But you know it has to be

done sooner or later. And a lot of times I blame the people because they don't take the initiative to know also, so it's both ways.

Siemer: Well, that's what's interesting about your women's group. You reached out, and you wanted to know, and you had questions.

Rechebei: Yes.

Siemer: But there's never enough time.

Rechebei: Never enough time, yes.

Siemer: How long did the women's group go on?

Rechebei: It went on and off. You know, it became active on issues, and then it sort of disappeared.

Willens: It's still active now on occasion?

Rechebei: No, it's not active at all now.

Willens: Do you recall having any meeting with Ambassador Williams or members of the U.S. delegation about your concerns?

Rechebei: I don't think so.

Willens: You have referred to the quality of life here in the community and expressed some concern about the costs that have been associated with economic development. Is that primarily your concern—that economic development has proceeded too rapidly and engendered certain adverse consequences?

Rechebei: Yes. I think it was not synchronized with other developments that usually go along with economic development, like educational development.

Willens: Let's stick with that for a minute, since that's an area that you have such expertise in. What would you have preferred to see on the educational front that has not in fact taken place?

Rechebei: In terms of education, we should have been able to produce more people who would be able to do more work and be able to take over some of these businesses here, do the work themselves. A lot of them are not prepared to do that. And not only here, but the ability to go out and find work elsewhere.

Willens: Are you speaking about vocational education of a kind?

Rechebei: No, education in general. I think we should train our people to be able to work here, as well as go out and work somewhere else, wherever they feel like working. Right now I see our economic development moving so fast, and we haven't really sat down to decide what kind of life we want as a result of this economic development. Nobody seems to care. I think all the politicians are trying to make a name for themselves by bringing in investments and doing this and that. That will be a part of their legacy. When you build a hotel here, there's an impact in the neighborhood. When you build a golf course here, there's an impact on the environment. And I'm not trying to be simplistic about it. I think you need to think of the whole aspect of this economic development and the fact that people are coming in to the islands. We're getting too many people on these islands. Every morning I drive by my place and pass these barracks or living quarters, and I see people brushing their teeth outside. It shouldn't bother me, but we never saw that kind of things before, and I don't know whether we want to see those continuously. And about this recent incident—the Bangladesh people—of course it's a very sensational thing, and

- people are excited about it. But if we had planned things properly, we wouldn't have those kinds of problems.
- Siemer: If you were explaining to people in the future what happened in the Marianas in the 1970s that caused it to take the directions that you see today, how would you explain that from your own observations?
- Rechebei: Well, I guess being a part of the United States, that was the impetus to be what we are now. We wanted to develop economically, of course. But again, we forgot that we have lives also to live and not just make money and build buildings. I guess it's just economics, going back to economics again.
- Willens: You've raised some very basic issues, and they are often the kinds of issues about which you can form a political party and identify leaders who will articulate those views. Do you think there is enough public sentiment along the lines you're expressing to stimulate that kind of political debate?
- Rechebei: There is a lot of public sentiment, but I don't know if there are any leaders.
- Siemer: It doesn't coalesce in the two political parties though, does it? Both parties have somewhat similar views.
- Rechebei: Same programs, yes.
- Siemer: And there's not an anti-development party as opposed to a fast development party.
- Rechebei: No, not anymore.
- Siemer: Why is that do you think?
- Rechebei: I think everybody wants to be rich. Really, everybody wants to be rich.
- Willens: A human frailty.
- Rechebei: Yes. And they tend to see only tonight, not the day after tomorrow. So they fail to see the long-term effect. I can speak for myself here. I grew up in Chalan Kanoa. We were very poor. I was a kid then and I didn't know anything that was going on, but it was a safe environment. Now, I cannot even leave my house for a moment without being worried that somebody will break in. I was burglarized when I was in the house at night. So I came face to face with the person. I had to spend money to put steel bars on my windows. I never thought of that before. It was a strange feeling knowing that somebody actually came to my house when I was in there, and the police have not been able to do anything about it. So it's a very insecure feeling that a lot of us have now. You're only safe if your house is equipped with steel bars and security measures. I don't think we should lead our lives like that.
- Siemer: Was there any effect on you and your brothers and sister growing up because your mother was Japanese?
- Rechebei: Yes.
- Siemer: What were those effects in this community?
- Rechebei: The positive effect was having a mother who was Japanese. She opened our minds to other things that would not have been possible. But the negative was that we were sort of ostracized by the community. They made fun of us. They would just humiliate us whenever they could. I guess all the half-Japanese kids went through that.
- Siemer: Do you think that has ameliorated over time?

- Rechebei: Yes. It's gone now. But then it was pretty strong. The Japanese lost the war and, you know, they blamed the Japanese for everything. The kids were especially vicious back then.
- Willens: You made reference to the training of the local population to participate in more of the jobs that are being generated. Many of the Chamorros, in particular, but Carolinians also, work for the government and seem to think that the government jobs are to be preferred over the private sector.
- Rechebei: Well, I don't blame them. The government is making government jobs so attractive, and they're competing with the private sector. It's crazy. They're raising the salaries and expecting the private sector to keep up. And yet they want all this economic development. They want the private sector to play a major role in this, but the government keeps taking the taxpayers' money and promoting everybody.
- Willens: It's one way for the political leaders to demonstrate the benefits of economic development, namely more taxes that can support ...
- Rechebei: The government.
- Willens: ...a high-level government employment and retirement.
- Rechebei: I think that's a very primitive view of running a government.
- Siemer: If you have so many government workers as voters, however, it gets to be a political necessity, doesn't it?
- Rechebei: Not really, because you have voters in the private sector also. And if you're really sincere in what you're doing, that really shouldn't matter. But as far as locals working in government, the advantage there is that we have control over the political situation and even the economics. But I think in the long run we're going to lose that, because the outside investors, they of course have some influence on our politicians. And sooner or later, we're going to lose control.
- Siemer: What do you see, based on your experience, happening with the alien labor situation on this island?
- Rechebei: In a lot of cases, it has gone out of control, and I think we should probably look at the situation again. We need those workers because we want to develop. We want to build hotels and all this big stuff, and we need those construction workers. But if we just look at our people and see what they can do as a group and pattern our development based on what we can do, and then fill the gap with foreign workers, probably that's a better way to proceed with our development, and not be so greedy about trying to do so many things at one time at the expense of other things. So we really should look at our own people and see what we really want. But who knows? Maybe we don't want to change anything right now. Maybe all of us want to have the opportunity to pack up and leave and live somewhere else. And if things get difficult, we can always pack up and leave and lease our land to people for 55 years. Why not? So it's kind of a strange situation for us here.
- Willens: Well it does present a series of interesting questions, and you've given us some very helpful views on those questions. I think that concludes the interview. Thank you very much. Anything you want to say in conclusion that you haven't said and that you would like to say?
- Rechebei: No. I think whatever you asked I answered, and if you have any other questions I'll be available to answer them.
- Siemer: Thank you very much.
- Willens: Thank you very much.