Oral History Interview: Grand Master Edmund "Z" Szelap
February 21, 2022

Interviewer: Rachel Manela
Interviewee: Grand Master Edmund "Z" Szelap
Location: His home in Novi, MI

Rachel Manela: This is Rachel Manela sitting with Grand Master Z on February 21st, 2022 at his home in Novi Michigan. We're going to discuss Master Z's accomplishments in Isshinryu Karate and his work as a Martial artist, arts instructor.

Grand Master Z: My name is Edmund Szelap. In the Martial Arts community I'm known as Mr. Z.

Rachel: And, Where were you born?

Master Z: Dickinson, North Dakota

Rachel: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood, growing up.

Master Z: Umm, well, my parents had a small farm, in uhhh, I spent most of my young days there with my uh, dad's mother taking care of us. They started working us in the field at the age of five [5]. Then my dad uhh, moved to Michigan in uh, the early 60's and uh, we ended up in Troy, Michigan. Uh, he [his father] was working for Shell Oil and uh, later on, uh, through other circumstances, my dad lost the house and business in Troy. We ended up the East side of Detroit uh, down on Harper and Van Dyke. Uh, and I was there until my parents split up, uhhh, just before I graduated highschool. And then I took off across the United States for a little while, about a year. Traveling to different places and people I knew. Visiting them. I came back to Michigan because there was always work here. Then in '73 [1973] I went to work for General Motors. Um, spent fifteen [15] years with them,

working my way up the ladder uh, hated it. Um, and finally quit, uhhh, in ‘84-85 somewhere in there. I don’t quite remember anymore. Uh, went into construction. Because, I had worked with my dad my whole life. Never played as a kid. So, every day after school my dad would come and get me. I’d go to work with him. Every weekend I went to work. During The Holidays I worked. So, you know, that was really my life. I never played baseball, basketball, football, none of that kind of stuff. Didn’t learn to swim. Didn’t do any of that stuff. So, I learned how to work.

[3:10]

Rachel: Do you have any siblings?

Master Z: Yeah. I’ve got two brothers and a sister. Um, when my parent’s split, I stayed with my dad. My brothers and my sister went with my mother. So, uh, and then, my dad disappeared for a while, and I was out on my own. So… But, uh, I was always interested in the Martial Arts, but I had a chance, uh, when I was working for General Motors, I met a couple of guys. I ended up training, started training, in uh, officially, in Tang Soo Do with Master Sells, out of Ann Arbor. And, uh, a couple of years after that I met another martial artist, who worked for me. He never told me he was a martial artist [cough] And he introduced me to Robert White. And, Robert White is the person I trained with the longest. Uhhh, and consider my karate master for the longest time. But, uh, he introduced me to just dozens of other masters of Isshinryu and other styles and allowed me to train on the side with them. [clock chimes in background]. So, um, he was very, he was just, one of those martial artists who was really seeking the truth and knowledge. Didn’t really care about rank and stuff like that, so I never really cared about rank.

Rachel: Mmmm

[5:03]

Master Z: [clears throat] He was a real hard nose. All those guys in the early days of Isshinryu, they were all really hard. There were no protective pads. None of the kind of safety gear like we have today. And, uh, you learn to get quick because if

you didn't, you got hurt. And um, everybody had broken bones, busted, knocked out teeth, broken nose [chuckles] bruising, uh, that was just common everyday stuff. And that was in training. Tournament, same thing, there was no protective stuff back then, You got hurt, it's the way it was. I'm not a violent person by nature. I don't like fighting, um, but I was too stubborn to quit. Because, really back then at the dojo, we'd take in sixty, seventy, eighty [60-70-80] people a month and by the end of three [3] months if you had two [2] or three [3] of them left, that was good. By the end of six [6] months if you had one [1] left, that was good. The dojo never really got very big. It was always, you know, in flux constantly. People coming and people going. Most people quit before they got out of white belt.

[6:38]

Rachel: At that time, would it have been mostly adults?

Master Z: It was mostly adults. A few teenagers. Um, but that's, most of them were males, male adults. A lot of them were coming back from the war. They didn't even want to teach kids. Even later on when we did have to take kids, and the reason they took in kids, it was the only way to keep the doors open. Most of the instructors and most of the dojo owners didn't teach the kids. They'd have their lower belts come in and start teaching the kids. So, I was teaching from the time I was a green belt.

Rachel: When, you mentioned other Styles. Besides Tang Soo Do, what other ones did you [practice]?

Master Z: Uh, well, I went to green belt in Tang Soo Do. Um, I got my black belt in TaekwonDo underneath Don Prue. I studied Kung Fu and Tai Chi under Gary Torres. And, uh, he was head student of Peter Kwok. Um, There was a few others there along those lines that I studied, uh, that type of martial arts also. Different martial arts, bits and pieces of it. I trained with Joe Lewis. Not Joe Lewis the boxer, Joe Lewis the Karate guy. And then I had the chance to train with, I have a list of 25-30 guys who are Isshinryu Masters. But, Bob White was the main guy. Ken Pittaway was over us. Willie Addams, [Norbert] Donnelly, Pough. Gary Alexander. If you look up any of these names, you'll see who they are. Of course

Melton. Uh, Roy Osborne, he was, he was teaching um Surinchiryu. He'd been in Okinawa the longest. [Arcenio] Advincula, of course, he married Tatsu's daughter. He was there for 15-17 years, Okinawa, before he came back here. Sao Oriata, he was a tuite man out of Okinawa that came here. I got to train with him for quite a long time. I said, Gary Torres. That was Tai Chi and Kung Fu. Armstrong, which was Isshinryul. He was one of the head guys at that time. Jennings and [Angi] Uezu. Uezu used to come here all the time. Sherman Harrell, Harold Long, um, TJ Edwards. I trained with him and he trained with me for three years. Got his black belt from me, but he was a fifth degree master in Shorinryu. Uh, we still see each other to this day. Sifu Weisel, was another one that was Kung Fu and Tai Chi. Kesefuse, who was TJ Edward's instructor. When I finally promoted TJ, he gave me my 6th in Shorinryu. I had that before I had my higher ranks in Isshinryu. So, But the, I was never part of, although I was with Master white for a long, long time. for 30 years, I was never really part of the inner circle with him because I didn't go out drinking with those guys. I didn't agree with the way they hurt each other all the time. And I always thought there was a better way to teach. All of that hurting people and beating each other up and breaking bones, it didn't make them a better martial artist at all. [clears throat]. And that was never the original intent of the old masters. They didn't go around just beating everybody up. They really didn't want to use their martial arts if they didn't have to. The problem with martial arts as we see it today in America, all these Marines, they were, that's where it really came to America were through the Marines from World War II. They were over there, they didn't have, most of them had 18 months overseas before they were shipped back. So, they were always looking for something to do and of course with all the karate masters over there, they had a chance to train with all kinds of guys. But they never got the real root of what martial arts was. It was for defense. These guys turned it into an aggressive thing. Well, they were all aggressive marines fighting for their life. And, karate was originally developed to fight for your life against the aggressors that were constantly coming over and trying to take over Okinawa. Whether it was the Japanese, the Koreans, the Chinese. So the Okinawan people developed this empty hand fighting which is karate. Karate is two words Kara-te, means empty hand. So, they weren't allowed to have weapons. Anyone caught with a weapon was put to death immediately. So they learned to kill their armed aggressors that were there. Their people that were their conquerors with their bare hands. Well that was right up the Marine's, they

liked that [laughs] And so, uh, what happened then, is that became the standard. Well, to be a true martial artist, a true man of karate, a man of peace, you have to learn the other side of it. It isn't just about all the aggression. It's about learning how to handle yourself in society, how to walk away. How to not get your, don't take offense when people talk to you a certain way. Know that you have the capability of defending yourself, and hurting somebody and that it's better to walk away than hurt somebody. So, the guy says something to you, he calls you something. So what. What does that mean to you in the grand scheme of things? Nothing, nothing. What those people think of you is unimportant. It's the people that you care about, it's the people that you interact with. Those are the people that you worry about. And that's the thing that got lost, and it's still mostly lost today. So, I , I, and loyalty, that's another thing. So many of the martial artists today. They're not promoting fast enough, they're not this, they're not that. So they go look for somebody else. Oh, this guy here, he'll promote me if I come join his club. This guy will promote me if I pledge my loyalty to him. Well, I know guys that have changed schools 8-9 times, just so they could get promoted. Did they learn anything? No. And those that kept taking them in, knowing what they were doing, you know, they had some kind of a problem of their own because they apparently couldn't get enough students of their own to feel like they were accomplishing anything. That's why they would go, raiding other schools and trying to talk other people into uh, leaving their dojo,' come over to my dojo, and I can do this, and i can do that and i can promote you here. I never did any of that. I trained with a lot of different guys but I always asked permission and I still stayed loyal to my original instructor. Still went and trained with him all the time, let him know what I was doing. And that was important, that was out of respect. To this day, I still consider Bob White my full instructor, full time master.

[15:12]

Rachel: Can you trace your Isshinryu lineage, so your instructor would have been Bob White. Can you trace it back to Master Shimabuku?

Master Z: Yeah, um, [cough]. Well, Shimabuku, Shimabuku um trained a lot of guys. The first seven were the important ones. Nagle was one of them and Armstrong. Bob White ended up training up with one of Nagle's top students he

sent to Michigan to start dojos here with Ken Pittaway. And, uh, so Bob back then, you could train here and then go to Okinawa and get your test and get your certificate. And Master White did go to Okinawa and did get his certificate from Tatsu Shimabuku. So, the way Bob looks at it, and I do too, is he got his certificate from Shimabuku, so that's one removed. And, I got my certificate from Bob, so I'm 2 removed from that. I've tried to stay very true to how the katas were taught to me. Uh I don't try to change them, I don't try to flower them up. But, I do teach other things and this is where a lot of guys go wrong. They add all kinds of things to Isshinryu and they claim that's part of Isshinryu but it's not part of Isshinryu. Isshinryu is taught a particular way with a certain flair for fighting, certain fighting and for defending yourself. But, if you're a martial artist at all and you've been around for a long time, you will seek out other things. And you do that and you find things that may be more suited to you. Certain techniques, certain things that you can do easier and so you add that. But I always separate those, those things are not part of Isshinryu. So here's some other techniques you can learn, learn this, try this, this might work better for you. Because we can't all, uh, Martial arts wasn't originally taught as 1 thing for everybody. They would take a look at your age, your size, your infirmities and they would say to you, well this is what I'm going to teach you because I think this is what's best suited for what I think you're capable of doing. And so Isshinryu really was one of the ones that first came along; everything was taught the same to everybody. But, the audience he had, the clientele he had, were all big strapping marines. That's who they originally taught. He never taught regular people, you know, Americans or others who weren't Okinawan. So that did not work well when it came back to America and they started opening dojos. Everybody I know teaches the way they were taught. There's a few of us, and I got this from Master Pough who I met through Master White, and I'm still friends with Master Pough to this day and he's taught me a lot. Uh, he's an Isshinryu man also and he's the first one you know, what's more important, having a dojo where everybody… Well, what he said was, you want a dojo that has 20 students and you have 1 good one? Or do you want a dojo where you have thousands of students and you end up with hundreds of good ones? He said, how many people can you affect? He said, it isn't just about the fighting. He said, you can change people's lives. You can make life less stressful for them. You can take people that are overly aggressive and make them less aggressive. You can take those that are too meek and bring them to the center. You can help with their

confidence. Build the human being. And so, that really stuck with me, resonated with me. In 1990 I sat down with Dr. Pough and we came up with a system of how to teach, taking young people and making martial artists for life. And uh, I talked with Master White about it. And him and Dr. Pough were pretty close, and [cough] so he allowed me to explore that. I didn't see any successful Isshinryu dojos as far as having a lot of students and being able to make a living at it. So, I got tied up with uh, Don Prue out of california, he came here to open dojos in Michigan. And they were a hybrid Taekwondo and [cough] they had a system for opening schools and training, uh, instructors. So, I went… Because Taekwondo was huge here in America. They had dojos everywhere um so, I wanted to learn their business sense. See what it was. What made them different, what made them successful, how did they deal with the public. And I spent 3 years with them doing that while I was training in Isshinryu and developing the system that I teach today. I still teach great Isshinryu, but it's how you teach it. Young people and adults, doesn't make any difference who they are. I took that to Master White, and this is why I originally did it, I wanted to help him have a, he wanted to just teach karate full time. Um, so I thought I could help him do that. But everytime I brought these things to every dojo, everybody was resistant, very resistant to change. 'Well that's not how we do that, that's kiddie karate'. 'You're not teaching, you're not banging, you're not being hard enough, you know. Well, you can't, you're losing hundreds and hundreds of students, people that will never come back because of the way they got hurt. And they were good people. The people that stuck around back in the day were people that were already aggressive or already a little on the wild side. They were getting into bar fights and hurting people. You know, the slightest infraction they felt you uh, put towards them, they would want to punch you in the face, you know. So, why are we making those people more dangerous? You know, the people that need, that really needed martial arts were those people that were everyday family people, good people, people that didn't want to hurt anybody, people that you know, would get aggressive in a life and death situation or someone tried to hurt their loved one or child. But, they didn't have any idea how to defend themselves because they never had to do any of that kind of stuff. So, those are the type of people that I wanted to train. Um, and that's what my system did. And I worked with Master White and some of the other Masters of Isshinryu in the Detroit area for 3-4 years. It was just a constant struggle, a constant fight. So, I opened my own Dojo in Highland Michigan.

[23:19]

Rachel: What Year was that?

Master Z: 1990 we opened a satellite school under Master White. In 1992 I officially opened Family Self Defense Centers. And, using the system of teaching that I came up with and Dr. Pough helped me develop is what I have been teaching ever since. And we have a successful dojo. From the time we opened up, we've been above 100 students every month. Sometimes as high as 150-170 students. Most of the students that we have start with us early in life. Uh, and they're with us for, until they go off to college, and then they come back after college. That's what it should be. Taking students that you know, 5 years old, 6-7 years old, start training them, they stay with you all that time. Achieve their black belt. You teach them how to deal with other people, you teach them how to teach, you teach them how to talk to adults. All the things that we do in the dojo have made their lives better. Take the stress out of their lives because they don't worry about things. They're very self confident and that's done through the system of how we teach it. You start them off, and… When I started martial arts it was only four belt ranks. There was white, green, brown, black. Before that there was only 2; white and black. Okay, we train for 18 years, 20 years, your belt got dirty enough that it looked black and then you were awarded your black belt. Um, to keep track of where people were is why they added colors. And then eventually different systems started adding multiple colors and I adopted that in 1990, the multiple colors only because in America we're a fast food society. Everybody wants everything quick. They want to know where they're at. They want to be able to judge and gauge where they're at. So, we adopted the uh, taekwondo belt rank system. Changed it slightly, added a couple more brown belts too so we could… because of the number of katas that we have. And, we were able to use that belt rank system to build confidence in young students.
So, I like to say their training is 1/3 of their training, the first third is 90% mental, 10% physical. Uh, if I tell them to do a straight punch, I don't care if it goes here, it goes there [gesturing about], the arm went straight, that's good. But back in the day, when I was training, the punch had to be exact. Comes from here, their wrist had to be straight, the knuckles had to come down, they had to come straight out

with a rise and pullback. Well, I didn't get my first belt change or rank change… uh, it took me 3 years because of that. The first 90 days that I trained, all I did was do crescent steps up and down the dojo and do physical training. You know, physical training as far as exercises are concerned. Most people quit. [laugh]. We were used for punching bags. 'Okay, we're going to have uh, one steps. So, you throw a punch at this guy and he's you know, so he students that were around already for several months or years. They would hammer on you, trying to get you to quit. But, with our system, you know what. We broke down the punches to a smaller number. You know the first 7 punches, if you can do the 7 punches and they looked like they were punches, then you were able to go up in belt rank. The early belt ranks were only used to build confidence. It didn't have anything to do with their ability. The second third of their training was 50-50. 50 % physical, 50% mental. Now we were trying to uh, smooth out the wrinkles. Put a little finesse in it. The last third of their training is 10% mental and 90% physical. Learning how to actually use your body as the weapon that you have. But if you don't build the mind first, if you don't build the love of what they're doing, make it fun for them so they'll stick it out, make it so they believe so they can do it.

Because when we were doing demonstrations back in the day. When we had people come in back in the day, we're breaking bricks, we're doing weapons, you know, we're doing all kinds of crazy stuff. Most people, even the adults looking I'm not gonna be able to do that. And we got very few people that joined, you know normal people. [laugh' Very few normal people that would join. So, you have to make them believe that they can do it. Once you can make them believe they can do it, and you show them some respect, now you gotta show them how to communicate. Teach them it's okay to make a mistake. It's okay to make a mistake,we all make mistakes. There's people in our society are so afraid of making a mistake, it stops them from doing things. And young people too, You can't be yelling at them and treating them like little soldiers. That's how most people taught because they were soldiers when they learned. Stand at attention, be still, don't move, don't do this, don't do that. You better bow to me, you don't speak until you're spoken to. That just doesn't work with society. So how're you going to be successful when you're scaring away 90% of the people that you want to teach. So, we eliminated all of that. Uh, I don't even wear my belt at class, I don't wear my uniform at class because that's scary to the kids. It's better that they feel they can come to you with anything. And that's what's important. And building that

relationshi[p between the instructor and the students so that when they're having struggles and they're afraid to even go talk to their parents, they'll come and talk to you and you can talk to their parents. And you know, I don't try to teach anything that goes against what their parents believe. You can't do that either. You want to reinforce their parent's role in their lives. And that's what we do.
We have kids that are 6 and 7 years old that are leading groups of men, leading adults and vice-versa. The guys working the kids, it softens them a little bit. It gives them time to be playful. And that changes the dynamics in the dojo. We have the kids and adults train together. Always have since the day we started. And it makes for a family atmosphere. And so instead of being in competition, they're all trying to help each other. Everybody trying to achieve the same goal. [clear's throat]. Most dojos, I don't think… well back in the day it took years to get a black belt. So you get 1-2-3 testing every 2 or 3 years. Today most dojos I think are lucky if they get 2-3 blackbelts a year. We average, we average 20 a year. 20 black belts a year. We have just tons of promotions. And that's rare. That's really really rare. Now some people say, some of the people I deal with in Isshinryu, in the early days they always said; 'well that's kiddie karate, not really teaching karate, they can't defend themselves, they don't do well…' Well, in 1992 when I opened my facility up in Highland, my wife and I did it, um, we set out to dispel that.
So, I took a group of students and we trained those students for a tournament. And for years after that, for 20 years after that we took more trophies; kata, weapons and fighting than any other school [hitting the table with hand] anywhere ever has. There were times we'd go to tournaments and we'd actually walk away with 101-102 trophies with 30-35 students. Which means, we just about wiped out everything. We had several schools that quit coming to tournaments when they knew we were going. Now, the thing is, I never had any of my blackbelts and myself judge, we went to other tournaments and had other schools judging us, and yet we were winning all the time. So, they can't say that we're doing bad martial arts. Our students over the last 20 years. I have hundreds of students that have been recognized by the hall of fame as being top in the country. Our instruction staff has been recognized by the hall of fame as being the top, uh, top instructors in the country. Our dojo's been chosen as being in the top 5 dojos in the country for 12 years. And sometimes we were the top dojo. Um, so I think we have done our job in dispelling the way people feel about 'this is kiddie karate.' Uh, that you have to be violent and hard and you know, beat people to see if they have the metal to

make it. Uh, it isn't necessary. They didn't do that in the old days. Now yeah they trained hard physically they did makiwara they did all kinds of things that would build the body's strength to take punishment. But they didn't hurt each other on purpose. A Lot of schools here hurt each other on purpose. Um, as far as learning martial arts in the greater Detroit area. Out of the greater Detroit area in the hall of fame, we have the most people inducted into the hall of fame. 30 people from the Detroit area that got their start there have all been inducted into the hall of fame. And there's only about 150 inductees from across the world. So, that'll tell you the type of Martial Artist that'll come out of the Detroit Area.

[35:20]

Rachel: You were inducted in 2016, What did that mean to you?

Master Z: It was a validation of what my student's have accomplished. Um, it wasn't about me. Whether I was inducted or not isn't that big a deal to me. Whether I have rank, which I have these days, is not a big deal to me. But that was instilled in me by first instructor. Um, it's about the knowledge. I was able to [cough] I was supposed to give a seminar when I was inducted into the Hall of Fame, you know where I showcase my talents and do that type of thing. Instead of me doing that, I brought 20 students to the hall of fame, some of them were as young as 7-8 years old. And I had them teach everybody. And that was really the highlight of my being in the Hall of Fame. We had a few old masters that wouldn't participate, but most did. And they were really, really surprised at how well the young people did at teaching them something they'd never learned before. And what we taught them were 2 person katas which we developed and to help understanding fighting body movement and an old, lost kata by Tatsuo Shimabuku called Gojoshiho, his version. And everybody wanted to come to that seminar. They had so many people coming to that seminar they had to break it up and, uh, force some of the people to go to some of the other seminars. [laughing]. So, I think we proved our point there. And, all these young students that were there, they've all been champions multiple times, they've been recognized by the hall of fame more than once, instructional staff has been recognized more than once. I don't know what else to say, you know, it's just, that has really been the highlight of my Martial Arts Career for me.

[37:50]

Rachel: What year did you earn your black belt?

Master Z: Oh god.. That was…

Rachel: In Isshinryu

Master Z: I can't be sure. I think it was, it was some time between '88 and '90. Somewhere in there. I never kept track of it.

Rachel: And, so you were mentioning that, when your students were able to teach in the seminar was one of the highlights of your career, but thinking back to when you were competing at tournaments or going to events, are there any that stand out to you? Or testings for yourself?

Master Z: Well, Tournaments… I think I have two that really stand out for me. Two for different reasons. One was uh, the Grand Nationals I think in '82 or '84, it might have been '80 or '82. Uh, held in Northville, Michigan. Back then they only had two divisions, lightweight and heavyweight. If you were over 165 lbs, you fought at a heavyweight. We were fighting guys at that time, if you were in the heavyweight division they could be 230-240, 300 pounds. Well, I was 166, and I was fighting a guy they called "baby Hughie". Big guy, 6'4". This guy had to be 305 pounds but he was muscle, wasn't fat. And, I just dreaded going in the right but I went in the ring and right off the back I threw a high kick into his chest and broke my foot. I hit him so hard, and he reached down and punched me in the face and knocked me to the ground. I got up, I knew something wasn't right, I didn't know my foot was broken at the time, I got up and was having trouble standing with my right foot forward, so I put it to the back and from then on I couldn't kick. And, he was so big, he took me 1, 2, 3. Just reached down and punched me each time and knocked me to the ground. And when I walked off, my foot just swelled up so big, I had to go to the hospital, had my foot bound up and taken care of. But, that's the way it was. Um, I've had my ribs in tournaments and in the dojo, I've had broken ribs, broken hand, shoulder dislocated, teeth knocked out. Never had

my nose broken, my hands were always fast enough to protect my big nose. But, but you had to be fast. Um, so that was the one.
The other one was, I was at a Korean Tournament, Tang Soo do tournament and uh, [clears throat]. It was all korean judges and I was fighting at the very end for the top spot, and their top guy. And we fought for 7-8 minutes and I couldn't get a point. They just wouldn't give me a point. And he couldn't score on me. Finally, the tournament director, the head guy came and took over the ring and I scored two points nad he scored three. But, everytime I hit this guy, everytime I'd get in on him, they would not give me the point. They were so… Every tournament, every dojo that had a tournament, their students had to be number one. Their student's had to win. If somebody else was winning, it wasn't fair, they just couldn't believe it. And that tournament sticks out for me. I know I didn't win, supposably, but I know in my mind I did because I scored on this guy over and over again, they just wouldn't give me the points. And the fact the tournament director had to come take over the ring shows just what it was all about. I still didn't win, but at least I got a couple of points on the guy. And, uh, that one sticks out to me. The rest of them were all just.. And I wasn't a great fighter, don't get me wrong. But, I wasn't afraid to go and fight. I fought every time that my instructor's asked me to and I went to every tournament that I could go to, because it was a necessity for me. I was fearful. Always had been. I grew up on the streets of.. My teenage years I grew up on the streets of Detroit on the East Side. During the riots I must have been involved in 90 fights on the street. And, uh, a lot of 'em, I ended up in the hospital. So, you know, I had to overcome that. That's why I took Martial Arts, to feel comfortable. To feel like I can defend myself when I get out there in the street. And so, it did a lot for me. Because as a young man I was angry, I was upset, I was fearful. So, if somebody said something to me, I hit them right away, because of fear, I have no choice. If I don't get in there right off the bat and tangle they're not going to leave me alone. And that worked well for me. I'm telling you, I'm one of those guys, I had to carry a gun to school, that's the truth. I got caught with it too. I got in trouble for it. Uh, I fought almost everyday for the first three years I walked to school. I walked several miles to go to school. I went to a Catholic school but it was that no man's land in between Harper and Van Dyke and Gratiot, where I got in a fight every single day. After a couple of years, they didn't bother me anymore because they knew as soon as they approached me, we were gonna tangle. And I didn't care if I got beat up or not, because I did a lot of times, sometimes I didn't.

Byt, after a while it was too costly for them. They knew they were going to get hurt, they were going to get punched, it wasn't going to be a fun time, they weren't going to lord it over me. And that's what my dad taught me. My dad was a golden gloves boxer in the service and he said; 'they look at you cross eyed, hit 'em. Get the first lick in and just go for it, otherwise they're never going to leave you alone.' So that was my first foray into fighting, having to defend myself. And, uh, so by the time I was in highschool there, nobody bothered me, I walked the streets and anywhere or way or time I wanted. Anytime, it was okay, I was okay. I felt okay doing that. But, I was always on edge, always on edge. So, martial arts I found will take a really meek person and bring him up to a level that's normal and take somebody that's overly aggressive and bring them down to a level that's normal. That society can accept, [laughing].

[45:42]

Rachel: Do you have any opinions about governing bodies of Isshinryu or Martial Arts in general?

Master Z: [clears throat] Yeah, well there's… Here's the thing. In Okinawa, in Japan, Karate didn't come from Japan, everybody thinks it did. Japan thinks they owned Okinawa their whole life, but they didn't. Real karate, kara-te came from Okinawa. There wasn't a governing body until the 1920s when the All Japan Budokai got together and finally decided to recognize systems because things were cropping up all over the place and to recognize who the head masters of systems were. And this was all because of an incident in, um… What they called the Sino, Uh, Russian-Sino Games. The Russians came into Japan and they had these fighting games and the Russians were always winning. This guy would just beat the heck out of the Japanese and they just couldn't overpower the size and height of these russian fighters. Uh, an Okinawan master was visiting Japan during the period and he was taken to the games and he's watching what's going on. And the Russian challenged him, challenged anyone in the audience. Well, Master Motobu took the challenge, went up there and nearly beat this guy to death. And in fact he did die on his way back, when they sent him back home, he died on the trip back. And the Japanese were just floored that this little Okinawan beat this guy. Well, there's a caste system there, and Motobu was of a low, was considered lowbrow, so

they wouldn't learn from him. So he took his number one student, Funakoshi and they would learn from him. Funakoshi was a teacher in Okinawa. So, that's how Karate came to Japan. And then during that period of time is when they decided we've gotta find out who the real masters are, what these different systems are, and that's when the Budokai was formed and everybody was given rank and belt, all that kind of stuff came up, out of that. Before that it was just a hodgepodge. "Oh, I heard this guy, this guy is really good, this guy fights, this guy can do that.' You would travel around and try to learn things. Now, Okinawa is 8 miles by 90 miles. It was easy for them to walk around and find guys and learn. When Martial arts was introduced to the Marines in 1947, um, those instructors that were teaching Americans had no idea the vast size of the United States. And so, the loyalties that students had there to their masters and the respect changed when they came to this country. When Shimabuku first came here he was just in awe, he did not understand how big this country was until they flew him back and forth across it several times. And, that's why they had to have so many different ruling bodies in America. Because of the size of it. One, one man could not oversee the Isshinryu empire that was being built. Uh, there were just too many egos. You've got a lot of Marines that are all gung ho, first into the breach and they all got big egos, and they have to have. And so, there was a lot of infighting and so they all formed different organizations, different groups. And that's how we got so many different high ranks. But, actually at one point in time they broke it into 5 areas of the country with a different board over all of them that reported to the main board. The main board used to travel around. Avincula used to be on that board, Armstrong, a couple of others. They would travel around and oversee all promotions. But, as it grew and got larger and larger, it just couldn't be done. Too many fragile egos, that's why people broke away. I've always tried to stay loyal to my instructors. Uh, Master White, I never showed disrespect, and I tried to help him all I could. Thinking that, this is the way it was meant to be, the way it was supposed to be. You can't keep breaking away, starting your own organizations, thinking your people are going to be loyal to you, because they're not. because we
When they get dissatisfied, they're going to do the same thing you did. And so, that's the biggest problem in um, karate, Okinawan Karate here in the States today. So the only board that I truly recognize today is the Hall of Fame. Tatsu Shimabuku set that up, gave permission to Harold Long to do that, and it's the one body in Isshinryu that doesn't care what other organization you belong to, who you

came up under, everybody that's Isshinryu comes together there, and they're all judged the same way. [hitting the table for emphasis.] All given the same respect. And so, I really pledge the bulk of my loyalty to that group, that's what I aspire to support them and you know, showcase our school there where everybody across the united states see what we can do.

And we've had people ask us well how do you do that, can you teach me this, what about that. And you show them and you tell them what it's about and they still don't change. And so, Isshinryu is not as prominent as it used to be, its starting to die out too, like some of the others have, but it's still a long way from being dead because of the number of students and people we've had.

[52:37]

Rachel: Have you heard about what people call McDojos?

Master Z: Well McDojos is something my wife coined. And what it is, is franchise dojos. Franchise dojos in the last several years have become a big deal. I first ran across it in 1990. Uhm, when some of the Taekwondo Schools were opening schools, they would take anybody that wanted to [and said] 'We'll teach you on Saturday and Sunday what you're supposed to teach next week. And, you got an instructor belt but you didn't have a black belt. So, you could be a brand new student and opening a school with brand new students and you had an instructor's belt and you were teaching for them. And that's the way it is. We have one of those right down the road from us here in Novi. Its a franchise, they've never been in Martial Arts, knew nothing about it, they bought into the franchise, cost them quite a bit of money, and the guy gave them the whole curriculum, they put a lot of stuff on video, he would come in and help work with them. But, you know it just doesn't work that way. And unfortunately some of the people who sign up, some of them sign up on contracts and so they're stuck for the month and uhhh, they don't know that they're not really being taught martial arts by somebody that knows what they're doing. They're not even sure they are being taught real martial arts. Because anybody can say in this country; 'You know, I started witchy-ryu Karate. I'm the headmaster. I went and bought my red belt last week at Century Martial Arts,' Okay. [chuckling] They have no background at all. But people don't know how to check on that they don't know how to look at that. So people walk into a good dojo

or a bad dojo, it's just, for most people it's just the luck of the draw. Um, that's why we've tried to stay in one place, we have a reputation here. We've been around. My program, my school has been around for 30 years. We're known in the area, we're known all across the country because I kept ties with everybody, every organization. I don't care what it is, if its an Isshinryu organization I stay on friendly terms with them. I don't try to tell them what to do, and I don't poo-poo what they're doing. Um, and same thing, if you're a martial artist from another style I'm still friendly with you. I'm not saying my system is better than your or that yours isn't any good. I respect what you're doing because in truth if you get good whatever it is your doing if you can truly master it you'll be okay against the average person in the street. You may not be good against a professional, that's the difference but if you're being attacked and martial arts is about defending yourself, not attacking someone else. If you take it from a defensive standpoint, you're always going to be, have a slight edge. So, I think as a martial artist you need to learn some of the other systems, you need to go to seminars and work on the things they think are good in other systems. You need to dfo some tai chi, you need to do some kung fu, you need to do some other karate. So you can see what you're up against so you have, when you see a person take a certain stand and they do a certain thing and you're in conflict with them you know how to defend yourself from that. Because for every aggressive move there is some type of defense. And that's the big thing. So, with me, you know I've had some krav maga, I've had kung fu, I've had tai chi, I've had tai chi combat, um, I've done tang soo do, which is hard core korean karate, Taekwondo which is the art of high kicking, it is not karate. It is the art of high kicking. And then, you know married other martial arts and Isshinryu. You know, sword, weapons, um, these are all things that I've you know, trained in, been exposed to. Some of them I've got belts in, some of them I haven't'. So, its enhanced my knowledge of how to use my Isshinryu.

[57:49]

Rachel: What do you see as the future of karate and Isshinryu in the United States?

Master Z: Well, [sigh], I think it's dying out right now a little bit. Don't get me wrong, that it', it's totally waning. There's a lot of martial art dojos today in

Isshinryu. But it's harder and harder to get people into those, especially adults. And, um, organizations are breaking down. The old masters of Isshinryu are dying off and nobody's taking over the schools. Or they take over the school and they have their own ideas and they're recreating the same problems everybody else had when they first started, so they fail. They fail in the first year because they can't afford the building. Um, and this is the problem, breaking away, breaking away, breaking away. You think you have knowledge but you don't really get the knowledge until you've been in this thing for 10-15 years. There's so much to learn its impossible to understand the higher things that you're learning or how to use it until you've really been seasoned for a while. Um, that's a revelation that doesn't come for a long time. So, there are many people out there that got their black belt and want to open a dojo, and they don't go back and train. They think they got everything, but they just got the basic tools. And so the things that really matter are getting lost. The stuff, the higher stuff that you need to learn. The tui-tae, how to conduct yourself, how to move, how to be fluid, how to drop your weight into your strikes, how to do precision strikes. Because as you get older you get sloppier, you can't just be banging away at each other. Um, that's getting lost. Uh, there aren't enough martial artists that have stayed with their original instructor, and been there long enough that they'll teach them those things. And, as every old master passes away, there aren't too many of us that have a lot of that stuff. And so, you can only teach so many people. So, my goal these last several years has been to accelerate the training of several students of my students to give them more than they're really capable of understanding yet, but exposing it to them in such a way that they're going to use it, remember it, and then hopefully it will click in in the future. It will make sense to them, All of a sudden they'll have that lighting moment. And you see that, in the system I run right now, you see that with students on the very low end. You'vre teaching, all of a sudden you see a light bulb go off in them, 'oh, I get this!' And then another year goes by, two years go by, 'Oh, guess what, I get this!' And I think the same things are going to happen on the higher end of things. So, I have a few people I'm exposing to that type of thing now, not everybody because some of them, it will overwhelm them. You have to have someone who truly wants to learn in their heart and when you see that person, you've gotta give them something to keep them there, so they realize there's more to this. Because a lot of the training in many of the schools is just repetition, repetition, repetition, the same boring thing. Oh we can't teach you that for another 3 years, you're not of

rank. If you have the, that insatiable search for knowledge and I can see that you're absorbing although you cannot master it yet but you understand it, you can do it, you're just not mastering it yet, I will continue to feed you all the things I have come across, and that's an awful lot.

I've been in Martial arts for 48 years, only 30 years at my own school but I taught for other instructors for 12 years. That's a long time. And trained. In the early days, the biggest, the thing that's slowing down training today is that you have an hour class, a two hour class, actually 45 minutes to an hour is what they say is ideal. Most of our classes are an hour. When I was training it was minimum 3 days a week and a class was 2.5 hours long. 45 minutes doing calisthenics and physical training of the body, um, 45 minutes going over what you already learned, everything, just doing punches and kicks. We would throw, every class you'd throw 30 of every kick and every punch right hand and then left hand. So you'd be doing 4 to 500 punches and you'd be doing 5 to 600 kicks. Okay, that's just the way it was. Then you would learn kata. Okay, a few minutes of kata, you'd get 4 or 5 moves, and then you'd just practice those 4 or 5 moves. And when the instructor finally thought you had those after a couple of weeks, then he'd teach you 3 or 4 more new moves. So it took a long time.

Then, when I started teaching, I taught at a school, my first school actually opened up in Highland, it ran 6 days a week, and I would teach 5 hours a night, and I would teach 5 hours on Saturday Morning. Every class was an hour long and I taught every class. And, that is when I feel I really got good. Teaching like that, those 10 years at that school, every night, every night, every night, doing the basics, doing everything, that's what made me good. So you can't discount that, that's why I'm still fast at 70. I'm still at 70. I can still pinpoint something at 70 years old. Uh, that's because of the repetition. I don't have to think about it, I see the movement, something starts to come at me, I see it before it happens [clock chimes in the background]. And so I'm reacting before the punch gets there. So, the biggest thing for people training today, you must do the other training at home. You have to go out in the backyard and run your katas, you have to do your physical training on your own. And, a lot of students don't do that. They're gonna get their black belt because of the knowledge they have, that's what you're going to a dojo for, you get that knowledge, you have the knowledge, and you can spew it out, you get your black belt degree. Now, is when you're supposed to learn how to use it, how to make it work. And a lot of them stop, and never learn. That's the

hard part and I guess I've been very very fortunate that the students that we've taken to black belt, most of them end up, before they leave me, going to 3rd or 4th degree. They stay and train with me, you know, an average of 10-12 years, some longer, uh, usually they come back from from school or once they've settled into their life they come back, get married, they come back. This is what's going to build longevity and make karate still relevant and stay. Um, having students bring their kids back to us, now that they're grown, they have kids. But, not many dojos have that. This is the change that needs to happen in all martial arts. Some schools have kept people coming because now all of a sudden they've got 15 degrees, 20 degrees, there;s 40 degrees! No there's not, that's just to keep people coming in and paying money, that's what it's about. The whole system was never set up to be that way. And, this is why sometimes the rest of the world laughs at American Karate because they see all this stuff happening, and they're going ' this isn't real'. And the other thing is, many of the martial artists here, they don't keep their certifications up everywhere else. I got my certifications from the world Isshinryu body, I got it from the uh, American Okinawan Karate, I got it from Okinawa, I got my teaching certificates from all three, I've gotten rank from all three, you know, I've been recognized by other systems where they've given me rank because of my abilities and the fact that I can take and train masters of another system and get them to a black belt in our system, or train them to do things they've never done before. That's the thing that you've got to do.

You can't say, 'oh, I got my thing from Joe Blow over here.' No, My students can take my number that's registered and that number will allow them to be recognized by the rest of the Isshinryu world and in Okinawa. That's not done anymore today. Most people don't go beyond that point, they don't go to that point, they just get their certificate, including a lot of my students, they get their certificate from me, and that's it, they don't really understand the ramifications from the rest of it. But, I've had many students that come from somewhere else and they have to start all over. 'Who is this guy that you learned this from? Nobody knows him. What do you call that, a punch, what are you doing?' You know? So they have to start all over, and it's disheartening to them. And unfortunately that's because people let their ego get in the way and instead of doing it properly, they open their own school, they declare themselves as a Master. I personally know guys that I was at a tournament with, one tournament with them one year and they're white belts, I go to tournaments with them the next one, they're 3rd, 4th, 5th degree black belts, it's

ridiculous. It's ridiculous and if you didn't know that person or remember them from something earlier and now you want to cross them and they're talking up their situation, you wouldn't know. 'Oh, I'm going to train under this guy.' And there's a lot of that going on. So, you know I like to try to teach the history of martial arts and the way I teach history is, I have to have 3 independent accountings and that is probably the truth. It can't all come from the same source, there's no way to verify that. But, if you have 3 independent verifications that say the same thing, or pretty darn close, that's probably the truth. Because a lot of the martial arts history of Okinawa was lost during WWII. The place was bombed into oblivion. and so be very careful. Even if today, you buy a book on Shorinryu, well you better get 20 books on Shorinryu and make sure you find some things that agree because every author puts his own spin on things.I've actually sat in my office, when I was working at General Motors, and some other Ishinryu guys would come in that I knew. They were older than me and further along, and they would say, 'Hey, Z what do you think about this, I'm writing a book, how does this sound?' And they would give me pages, 'what?, when were you called Mr. Isshinryu by Tatsuo Shimabuku? When did this happen?' You know, they're making up stuff left and right just trying to sell the book and soothe their egos. I often wanted to do a book that talks about those things. And maybe sometime here in the future before I die, I will do that. The truth, you know, there's so much phony baloney stuff out there, it's unbelievable. Don't get me wrong, I don't have all the answers, because I don't. But, I've been around a long time,I've seen a lot of things, I know what's working for me and my students. I know that they're respected across the Isshinryu world and that's the most important thing.

[1:11:54]

Rachel: Thank you so much for doing this interview with me.

Master Z: Well, thank you.