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THE HISTORY OF KENPO

by Arnold M. Golub



"Use your strongest technique on me."

I looked at the frail old man in front of me, knowing that he could be seriously injured by the full impact of a karate blow.

"Go ahead," he repeated, "use your strongest technique."

I looked at him again, wondering what to do. "I can't strike you, I might injure you," I said.

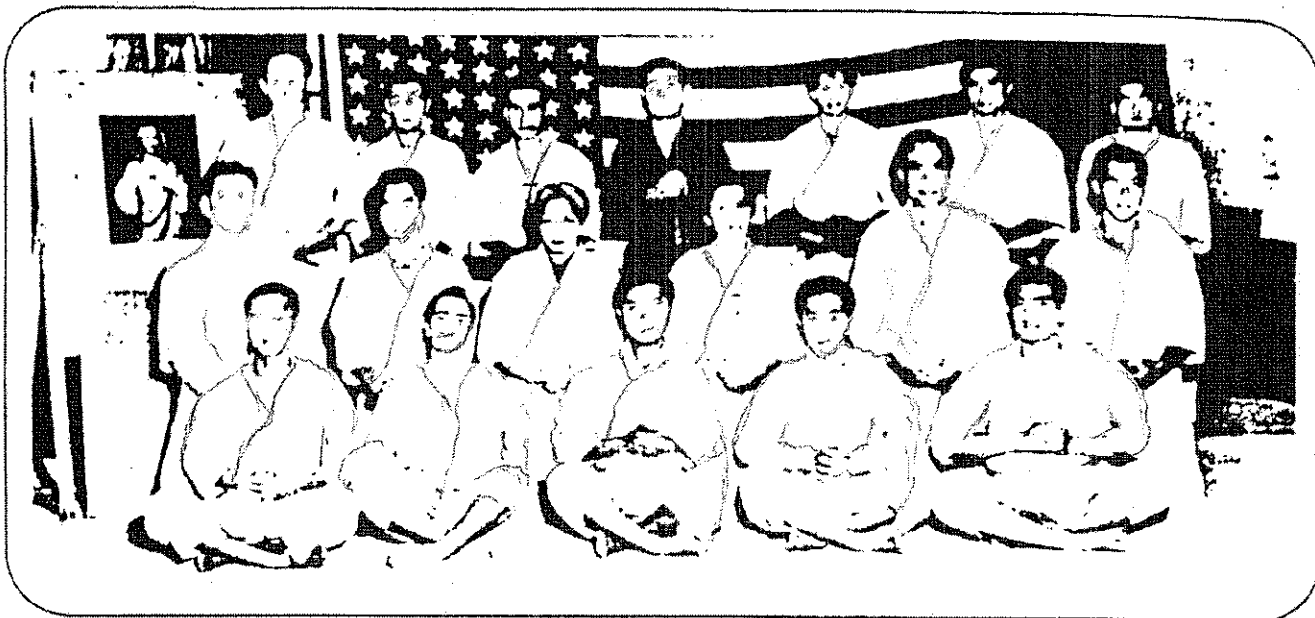
"You cannot hurt me," he answered. "Kenpo is my family's art."

I decided to hit him with a reverse punch, but as I prepared to punch him, he lay down on the floor in front of me. "How can I hit you when you're already down?" I asked.

"That is exactly the point," he answered. "No one learns how to strike someone who is already down. The whole point of karate is to knock someone down. People attack other people to knock them down. By laying down yourself, you have won the battle. Your opponent's goal has been accomplished, but you have won the greater victory since you ended the dispute without violence. Karate is good exercise, but it is not *true* self-defense."

The man speaking is James M. Mitose (Kenposai Kosho, the 21st descendant of the founder), the ultimate living authority of kenpo, the system he taught to William Chow who in return, taught it to Edmund Parker, "Father of American Kenpo."

Although James M. Mitose is acknowledged by historians as the man who brought kenpo to the West, he is well known only to a few serious students and instructors of the kenpo



Mitose's original self-defense school. Note William K.S. Chow (at Mitose's right; Mitose is in black) and Arthur Keawe (middle row, second from right). Opposite: Daruma meeting Wu.

system.

The major reason for Mitose's obscurity can be traced to Mitose himself and to his own beliefs about the kenpo system he brought to Hawaii from Japan. Kenpo (actually *koshoshorei kenpo*), the Mitose family's system, consists of a complete religious, philosophical and nutritional system, Japanese yoga, a series of evasion tactics known as "escape patterns," and a body-contact art known as *koshoryu kenpo*. Mitose's ancestors had kept the system alive by teaching it to successive generations of family members, but did not share the contact science (*koshoryu kenpo*) with outsiders.

After Mitose had completed his own kenpo training in his family's temple in Japan, he traveled to Hawaii where he was prevailed upon by the U.S. military to teach the *koshoryu kenpo* art to soldiers for use during WWII. Mitose began teaching *koshoryu kenpo* to people of all races in the late 1930s. By 1953, he had come to believe that the West was not ready for his family's wartime art, and that Westerners could not or would not understand that kenpo represented more than a set of techniques for fighting. Believing that his art had become corrupted (one of his students seriously injured someone and, as the student's teacher, Mitose felt personally responsible), he decided to retire from active martial arts instruction. From that time on he has kept a very low profile.

The kenpo system taught through-

out the United States today by Edmund Parker and his students has its origins in the system taught by Mitose. This system was modified so extensively by Parker in order to make it more suitable for use by Americans that he is generally acknowledged as the "Father" of American kenpo. Generations earlier, the Mitose family, having learned their system of body contact fighting from the head priest of the Shaolin temple in China, themselves modified the Chinese system extensively until it became *koshoryu kenpo*, a martial art suitable for use by the Japanese people. It can therefore be seen that kenpo has always been in a state of evolution—a characteristic that has probably been a major factor in making kenpo such an effective street-fighting art.

Kenpo has its origins in the same deep past as the other empty-handed fighting systems. Kenpo (or *kempo*, as it is sometimes spelled), is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese ideograph representing *ch'uan fa*, or fist law. The origins of this system date back to about A.D. 525 when, according to legend, an Indian monk named Bodhidharma (Daruma in Japanese) traveled from India to China to spread Buddhism. After his arrival in Canton, he traveled north to Nanking where tradition states he had a famous meeting with Emperor Wu in which they discussed

Buddhism.

Bodhidharma subsequently traveled to Honan province and arrived at the Shaolin temple, where he found the monks emaciated and unable to concentrate on his lectures. He gave them a series of physical exercises designed to strengthen their bodies and to enhance their attention span. These exercises, called *shih pa lo han sho* (eighteen hands of the lo-han) are reputed to be the basis for Shaolin *ch'uan fa*, an empty-handed martial art thought to be the predecessor of karate.

This system of *ch'uan fa* continued to evolve for about 700 years. Then in about A.D. 1200, Gengis Khan made war on China and attacked the region containing the Shaolin temple. Rather than to produce disharmony by confrontation, the high priest escaped to Japan where he met a Shinto priest whose name was Kosho. Kosho had already studied a variety of fighting arts, including *ken-do* (swordsmanship), *naginatado* (lance fighting), *kyudo* (archery), fighting on horses, and swim fighting. Kosho was a master of these arts and studied the *ch'uan fa* system with the high priest. After becoming a master of these combined systems, he changed his name to Mitose and founded a martial arts school.

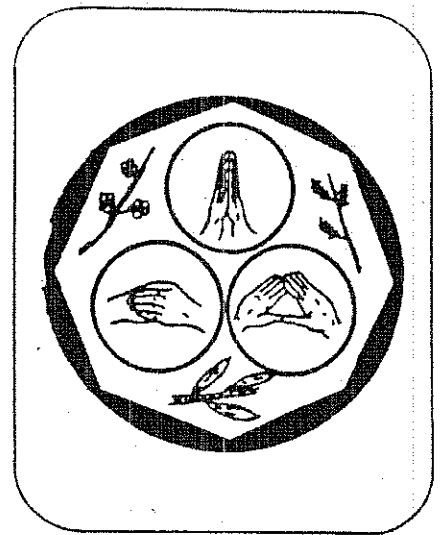
In about 1280, a descendant of Mitose (Kosho) converted to Buddhism. This conversion placed him in an unusual position. On the one hand, he was a martial arts master. On the other hand, the teachings of Buddha stated that no person has

the authority to harm another, and that one must go unarmed in order to demonstrate his/her peaceful nature to others. After many years of meditation under the pine trees on the family property, Mitose's descendant finally reconciled his martial arts system (koshoryu kenpo) with the teachings of Buddha. According to James M. Mitose, the present authority of the art, his ancestor realized that *true* self-defense consisted of escaping from attackers using *no* body contact. The only exceptions to this guiding principle are when aiding people who are unfamiliar with true self-defense, when assisting law enforcement officers, or during wartime. Mitose's ancestor subsequently founded a temple in which he taught his self-defense martial arts system. This system,

kosho-shorei (*ko* means old, *sho* means pine tree, *shorei* means spiritual calling), teaches true self-defense—self-defense, that is, without body contact. The kosho-shorei system has been passed down from one Mitose generation to another, as has the kosho-shorei coat of arms associated with the art.

One part of the kosho-shorei system, the wartime art (koshoryu kenpo), modified from Chinese ch'uan fa, was taught only to family members (insiders), and was passed on from generation to generation. According to James M. Mitose, his family thought it important to preserve the wartime art in order to be familiar with it and to be able to defend against it.

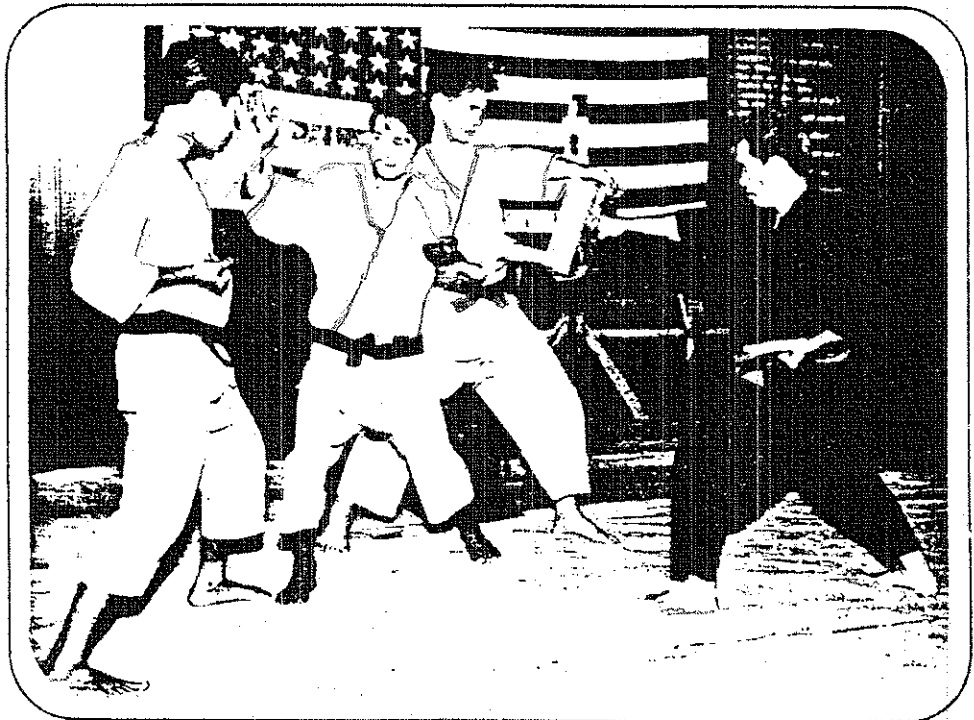
James Mitose himself was born on the Kona coffee plantation in Ha-



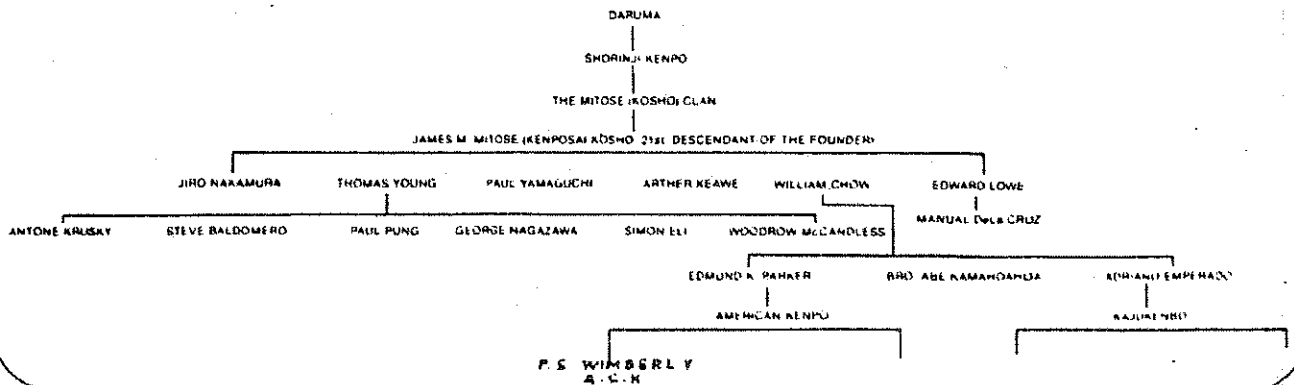
The Kosho-Shorei coat of arms. Note empty hands and covered fist, symbolic of human trust and the philosophy of non-violence.



Above: Mitose practicing in 1947. Right: Young Ed Parker working with William Chow and others from Mitose's school of self-defense. Below: The kenpo family tree, as of the late 1950's.



EVOLUTION OF KENPO (TO LATE 1950's)





A portrait of James M. Mitose, taken about 1947, shortly before publication of his book.

waii in 1923. His father had moved to Hawaii at the end of the 19th century when Japan had appeared prepared to go to war. When the young Mitose was four, his sister accompanied him to Japan where he was expected to study the family art and to take over from his father as the master of the kosho-shorei system.

He acquired his education and kenpo training in a large temple on Mt. Akenkai in southern Japan. Mitose recalls that during the 15 years he spent in Japan studying with his grandfather, he was "to take over the family business, including religious activity and kenpo arts. I entered at the age of four. I did the chores of the temple, like sweeping and cleaning and serving. It lasted for about two years. Then, I started studying religious books in Japanese, translated from Sanskrit. Half the day was spent studying these books, and the other half day was used for learning kenpo martial arts, the law of the fist.

"I was there (at his family's Buddhist temple) until I was 18 or 19. When I left, I had been educated to take care of myself. Unless I worked for the day, I would not eat. Rather than beg for food, I tried to raise food myself in group activities with other members of the organization. Except for the head priest, all others were engaged in physical work, in the planting of rice, in the field, in cooking, chopping fire wood, and so forth. My studies at the Akenkai temple ranged from religions of India and Tibet to Christianity and Judaism,

and included Greek philosophy. I became a kosho-shorei minister at the age of 18 and left the temple."

After leaving the temple, Mitose recalls that he traveled to Kyushu, where he discovered that the law enforcement officers had no pistols or handcuffs. He decided he would teach them kenpo so that they could defend the citizens from bandits and gangsters. Subsequently, he left Kyushu to visit Hawaii and remained in Hawaii two or three years teaching kenpo to the police cadets before eventually returning to Japan.

"In our 'Law of Fists,' we are not supposed to obey the order of even the Emperor or the supreme commander of military forces." He relates that a Japanese cavalry division was on maneuvers in a mountain area. "My brother and I were op-

and on December 8, 1941, he enlisted in the territorial guard, where he served until the guard was disbanded by the military in 1942.

In 1942, wanting to repay the debt he believed he owed to America for having extended its privileges to him, and urged on by others who insisted that the kosho-shorei true self-defense system Mitose was teaching was suitable only for peacetime, Mitose founded the Official Self-Defense Club at the Beretania Mission in Honolulu. It was here that he first taught koshoryu formally to people of all races. One of the photos accompanying this article was taken at the Nuuanu YMCA to commemorate presentation of the shodan (black belt) rank to Arthur Keawe, one of Mitose's first black belt students.

Mitose says he wanted to teach



Daruma, the founder of Shaolin temple boxing, is depicted in a traditional way in this Japanese painting.

posed to these military operations, and some of our group were arrested. We did not believe in war. The people around me suggested I return to Hawaii as quickly as possible. Otherwise, I might be arrested and sent to a military jail." Therefore, in 1938, Mitose returned to Hawaii where he remained until moving to California in 1956.

When it became apparent to him that Japan and America would go to war, Mitose found himself in a very difficult position. He was American by birth. As a very young child, he had eaten American food and drank American water. Yet, his formative years had been spent in Japan. Ultimately, he decided his loyalty belonged with America. In 1939, he began teaching kenpo to ROTC cadets at the University of Hawaii,

people the true nature of self-defense, but that since it was a time of war, he decided to concentrate on his family's wartime art, koshoryu kenpo. Koshoryu kenpo was taught at the school from 1942-1953. In 1947, Mitose wrote *What is Self-Defense? (Kenpo Jiu-jitsu)*. In this book he presented the philosophy and techniques of kenpo. *What is Self-Defense?* was probably the first kenpo textbook in English. The photo of Mitose using a makiwara is taken from that pioneering volume. (According to Mitose, the purpose of such training is not to develop punching power. Rather, punching exercises are done "to destroy the evil in the mind. This is done by bringing the evil spirits out of the mind and placing them on the objects you are punching.")

When Mitose retired in 1953, he gave his school to one of his assistant instructors. He moved to Hilo, Hawaii, where he remained until coming to California in 1956. During the years he taught in Hawaii, he awarded the shodan rank to six students. Jiro Nakamura, taught privately by Mitose, was the first. Following him (in alphabetical order), were William K.S. Chow (who earlier had studied the Chinese arts for about ten years with his father), Arthur Keawe, Edward Lowe, Paul Yamaguchi and Thomas Young.

William K.S. Chow opened his own school, and by the late 1950s had also awarded the shodan rank to at least four students: Adriano Emperado (who also studied with Mitose and who subsequently founded the kajukenbo tradition in the late 1940s), Masaichi Oshiro, Edmund K. Parker (who also studied briefly with Mitose and who subsequently founded the American kenpo tradition), and Paul Yamaguchi (also awarded the shodan rank by Mitose).

Arthur Keawe's history is unknown. According to Bruce Haines, he may have left Hawaii for the mainland.

Edward Lowe opened his own school, became affiliated with Mas Oyama's Tokyo Kyokushinkai, and continued as an active instructor.

Paul Yamaguchi also organized his own school, but ceased operation in 1957.

Thomas Young, one of Mitose's assistant instructors, took over the school when Mitose retired. By the late 1950s, he had awarded the sho-

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Included in this article is a diagram that illustrates the evolution of the kenpo family tree. This tree is reasonably accurate up to the late 1950s. Most of the black belts achieved after this in the United States have been awarded by Ed Parker or by his students, and the Parker tradition has been primarily responsible for keeping kenpo alive in the United States.

Examination of the kenpo family tree reveals the debt owed to Mitose. Had he not brought kenpo to the West, most of us who are able to trace our tradition back to Mitose might be studying a martial art today, but it certainly would not be kenpo. ✕

Note:

The author wants to thank James M. Mitose for providing the copyrighted photos used in this article. He also wishes to express his thanks to Eugene Sedeno, a historian of the martial arts and a high-ranking kenpo black belt for making available his materials, including the kenpo family tree presented, with modification, in this article. Finally, the author wishes to acknowledge the debt owed to Bruce Haines, whose dissertation, Karate's History and Traditions, provided much valuable information.

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