



## Robert A. Trias

(1923-1989)

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Robert A. Trias (pronounced "Tray-us") was one of the most influential and enigmatic martial arts masters of the 20th century. He assembled his own system of karate, Shuri-ryu, through a synthesis of Chinese, Okinawan and Japanese systems, opened the first American karate dojo in 1946, headed what became the largest international karate federation in history, and trained many of America's top karate competitors. He was by turns fatherly, arrogant, outgoing and secretive, and had associated himself at one time or another with almost every important karate master in Japan. Corroborating sources for much of his personal history are fragmentary (as with much of the history of karate in general) and his daughter, Dr. Roberta Trias-Kelley, a superb martial artist to whom he bequeathed leadership of the system upon his death in 1989, continues to teach Shuri-ryu karate and sell her father's publications from her headquarters dojo, Trias Karate, in Phoenix, Arizona.

The following biography has been pieced together primarily from information given in Trias's published works and from interviews with those who knew him. Corrections and additions are welcome and will be incorporated.

### **THE TRIAS FAMILY**

Robert Alberto Trias was born on March 18, 1923, in Phoenix, the son of Jesus Bara Trias and his wife, Dolores. He had one sister, Christine, and a brother, Jesus Ernest, both still living. The Trias family is of Hispanic origin, at least for several centuries back. His paternal grandparents were Manuel Bara Trias (1843-1924) and Josefa Bara Trias (1852-1938). The Trias name has been traced to a village of that name in Spain, about 40 miles north of Barcelona;

also to another Trias village in the Spanish municipality of Villa Viciosa in Asturias; and as a surname among nobility in Cataluña, Spain. The surname Trias, however, may actually have originated in Greece. It is currently known (but rarely) in various Hispanic countries (Spain, Philippines, Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico) as well as Portugal, Singapore, Greece and the American Southwest.

Trias enjoyed an unremarkable childhood in Phoenix, became a Star Scout in the Boy Scouts, and joined the military at age 17. He served in the Pacific during World War II, fought on the Armed Forces Boxing Team, and returned home in 1945. He married Jane Rita Arkenberg in 1947. Their only child was Roberta Jane, born in 1948.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF TRIAS'S STYLE**

Trias's style, now known officially as Shuri-ryu, evolved over time. His first instructor, the issuer of his first black belt certificate in 1943, was T'ung (or Tong) Gee Hsing. T'ung was a long-time master of the Chinese fighting art of *Hsing-i*, but had also achieved a rank of 3<sup>rd</sup> dan in Okinawan Shuri-te karate.

Tung had been raised from childhood by his uncle, Shang T'sao-hsiang, a revered fighting master. Shang passed on to Tung an enormous body of knowledge acquired primarily at the Hai Chiwang Sze Temple under the famous masters Li T'sun-Yi (1849-1925) and Sun Lu T'ang (1859-1932). Shang is said to have mastered both the "internal" systems (Chuan-fa, Hsing-i and Pakua) and the "external" systems (Shaolin-chun and Hung-kun) of Chinese boxing.

While stationed as a Buddhist missionary in Okinawa in the Chinese settlement of Kume Mura, T'ung had made the acquaintance of Okinawan Shuri-te master Choki Motobu (1871-1945) around 1938. As was T'ung's habit when meeting a master of another system, he proposed that they trade knowledge. Motobu, just back from 15 years of teaching karate to beginners in Tokyo, was happy to work with another master and readily agreed. T'ung was so impressed with Motobu's Kosho Shorei Kempo fighting style that he learned it as thoroughly as he could and incorporated into it his own Hsing-i and Pakua. Motobu apparently promoted T'ung to 3<sup>rd</sup> dan in Okinawan karate.

Trias first met T'ung while stationed at Tulagi in the British Solomon Islands in 1942. Trias was at that time training to contend for the middleweight boxing championship of the United States Navy, and his daily training activities attracted T'ung's attention. Trias described the fateful encounter in an interview published in *Black Belt* magazine:

There was this little Chinese missionary named T'ung Gee Hsing who always came to see me work out. One day he came up and told me he had been learning and imitating my footwork, and that he liked American boxing. I just brushed him aside. He kept on coming back, though, until one day he pestered me to practice with him. He was just a tiny little guy, and I didn't want to spar with him, but he kept on persisting until I said yes. I called all my friends over to see me kill this little man. I asked him if he wanted to spar with gloves, and he said it really didn't matter. Well, before you know it he was giving me the biggest thrashing of my life, and I was really embarrassed. He kept on pointing out how he could easily kill me if he wanted to. And right then and there I asked him to teach me.

It was a revelation that changed Trias's life. He gave up American boxing and devoted himself totally to studying karate under T'ung. One year later, on July 10, 1943, T'ung awarded Trias the rank of first-degree black belt, presenting him with a white silk certificate written in Japanese. The swiftness of the promotion was no doubt in recognition of Trias's many years of training in, and mastery of, American boxing. The original silk certificate has long since been lost, but T'ung later provided Trias with a paper certificate which reads (translated):

#### DIPLOMA.

Here in the British-owned Solomon Islands, resident R. A. Trias has studied Japanese karate with a respectful attitude, seeking after the true principles, and has satisfied the requirements for the rank of first dan certificate. Authorization by Tong Gee (third dan), 1943 July tenth.

Later in the War, Trias met another Buddhist missionary, Hoy Yuan Ping from Canton, China. Trias has written very little about his time with Master Hoy, other than to say that he trained with him at the Hock Keng Temple in Singapore. Hoy had become a master of "Kempo Karate" (Chinese Kempo?) under an unnamed teacher. Kempo may have been handed down in his own family; he claimed that his ancestor, Chen Yuan Ping, had been the first to introduce Chinese Boxing into Japan in 1644, and had invented the *Pinan* katas. This is interesting, because most historians attribute the pinans to the Okinawan master Ankoh Itosu (1830-1915). If there is any truth to Hoy's claim it would mean that the pinans came down through Peichin Takahara (1683-1760) to Tode Sakugawa (1733-1815), then to Sokon Matsumura (1797-1889), who taught them to Itosu. In fact, Sells (1995) states that Itosu's models for the pinan 1-4 katas were the *Channan* katas *dai* and *sho* plus two unnamed katas, all inherited from Sokon Matsumura. Sakagami Ryusho of the Shito-ryu school has traced these katas to a 16th-century Chinese book, the *Chi Hsiao Shin Shu*. Itosu apparently invented only Pinan-5 on his own, and adapted the others. So it may indeed be true that Chen Yuan Ping introduced his own adaptation of the Channan katas from the *Chi Hsiao Shin Shu* to Okinawa in 1644.

Master Chen (Ch'en Yuan-pin, or Chin Gempin in Japanese), was born in 1587 and died in 1674. Though Chinese-born, he became a naturalized Japanese citizen and lived in Owari, Aichi Prefecture. He is believed to have taught three *ronin* (masterless samurai) some of the tactics of Chinese Chuan-fa or Kempo; these three men (Fukuno Shichiroemon, Miura Yojiemon and Isogai Jirozaemon) later founded famous Jujitsu styles of their own, probably incorporating some of the Chinese Kempo striking techniques (Draeger, 1973). How Chen's *Channan* or *Pinan* katas made it to Okinawa remains a mystery; perhaps he traveled there personally. We will probably never know.

Trias may have furthered his knowledge of kempo under Master Hoy, but it is mainly the jujitsu in Shuri-ryu that Trias attributes to him. Hoy had been a student of the Japanese Jujitsu master Hoshinosuka Fukuda (1801?-1879), who had trained under Iso Mataemon (died 1862, also known by the name Sekizai Minamoto Masatari Yanagi), the founder of the Tenshin Shinjo school. Tenshin Shinjo-ryu specialized in *ate-waza*, or striking techniques, as well as grappling, so it was ideal for merging with Okinawan karate. Mataemon had created his style by merging two major branches of jujitsu: (1) Yoshin-ryu, a striking-oriented style he had learned from Oribe Hitotsuyanagi, passed down from its 17th-century founder, Shirobei Yoshitoki Akiyama, and (2) Shin-no-Shindo-ryu, learned from Joyemon Homma, passed down from its founder Yamamoto Tamizaemon.

Did Trias receive rank under Master Hoy? Trias claims only to have received "further recognition," whatever that means. It is possible that he was promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> dan. In any case, his time with Master Hoy was critical in giving him the broader background that helped him formulate his own style.

Trias apparently had no further contact with Master Hoy, or with T'ung Gee Hsing, his original karate master, after his return home in 1945. He mentions that Master T'ung is thought to have died in Taiwan in 1955 (not even a death date is known for Master Hoy). Further research into the life of Master T'ung is currently stalled. It can only proceed if the actual Chinese characters that he used to sign his name can be learned. Unfortunately they are illegible on the low-resolution image of his certificate published in Trias's book, *The Pinnacle of Karate*, and the original, if it still exists, is in storage with the rest of his surviving papers in Phoenix; his daughter has thus far refused any access to those stored documents.

Trias did train further in Jujitsu under Yoshin-ryu Grandmaster Frank Matsuyama, and in Kodokan Judo under Grandmaster Jujui Yamada, and was granted rank in Judo.

## **BACK IN ARIZONA**

After returning from the war, Trias served for 15 years as an officer with the Arizona Highway Patrol State Police, rising to the rank of Lieutenant and district commander for five of Arizona's 14 counties.

In 1946 he opened a small karate dojo in Phoenix, with mostly members of the Highway Patrol as his first students. It was, in fact the first karate dojo opened in the United States. He charged nothing for the training until 1961, when he began asking \$32 per *year* from his students for the privilege of training with him daily. Trias conducted the first Police Officer Karate Seminar in April 1951, attracting a number of high-ranking law enforcement officers including Fred Struckmeyer, Chief Justice of the Arizona Supreme Court.

Trias liked to keep exotic animals as pets during those early years. The Phoenix police once had to talk Trias into giving up his two pet chimpanzees who were creating chaos around his neighborhood. On another occasion the police were called out because Trias's African lion cub was getting loose and causing trouble. He even had an *elephant*, named Betsy, which tended to trumpet at odd hours of the night and wake the locals.

Once, when the famous fighter Joe Lewis visited him, Trias asked him what rank he held. Not believing Lewis's answer, Trias said, "Joe, I don't care if you're a billionth dan, I'll promote you to the highest rank I've got if you can go two minutes with this chimp here." Joe took a good look at the animal, which Trias advised him was "the meanest bastard you'll ever see," and wisely declined the offer.

Trias returned to Okinawa several times during the 1940's and 1950's, training there with various masters and perhaps receiving certifications or promotions of some kind. The certification requirements for various dan ranks in Japan were not well formalized in those days, and were pretty much given at the discretion of each master independently. And, of course, in the U.S. there were no practicing senseis at all who were qualified to promote Trias, so he had to rely on his various connections in Japan for personal instruction and certification. His 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> dan promotions are not known, and may simply have been skipped (not unusual in those days). But on September 1, 1951, in recognition of the level of mastery he had achieved, and probably also in recognition of his status as the leading sensei for Japanese karate in the U.S., he was promoted to 6<sup>th</sup> dan by Tatsuo Shimabukuro, headmaster of the Isshin-ryu style in Japan.

Twelve years later, when Trias's book *Karate is My Life* was published in 1963, he was listing himself as 7<sup>th</sup> dan (although the bestower of that particular ranking is not recorded). Shortly thereafter, on July 16, 1964, he was officially promoted to 8<sup>th</sup> dan by Yasuhiro Konishi of Shindo-Jinen-ryu, Trias's personal sensei for many years thereafter. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Trias's own organization, the U.S. Karate Association, promoted him, via a USKA certificate, which Konishi signed. Nineteen years later Trias was referred to as an 8<sup>th</sup> dan on certificates issued to him in 1983, confirming him as qualified to serve as an international referee. Trias also held 6th dan black belt rank in Kodokan Judo studying under Yaju Yamada in California, and studied the Yawara stick under Frank Matsuyama.

Trias stated in *The Pinnacle* (1983) that he was "a 9<sup>th</sup> grade Black Belt in karate, and international Style Head for all Shuri-ryu, a recognition granted in 1975 by Master Yashuhiro Konishi, 10<sup>th</sup> grade." This may be true, but Konishi is known to have told others that he never issued a formal promotion of his own to Trias. During the 1970's, Trias is said to have returned from a trip to Japan saying that Konishi had granted him the right to be called "Grandmaster." Clearly this represented a misunderstanding, because when Konishi heard of this he was reportedly so upset that he had to be physically restrained from leaving immediately for Arizona to confront Trias. Later, in 1978, the problem was solved when the U.S. Karate Association passed a resolution during the Grand Nationals in Florida that Trias be given the title of Grandmaster. Thereafter he was known to all as "Grandmaster Trias."

Despite these disagreements, Trias always spoke affectionately and respectfully of Konishi. After Konishi's death in 1983, Trias wrote:

Grandmaster Konishi, who inspired and, for the past twenty years, assisted me with invaluable information...will live in my heart as an example of the greatest karate-do master in the world. [He was] my latest teacher, friend and inspiration throughout my adult life...O'sensei I will miss you.

On July 10, 1983, Trias received his 10<sup>th</sup> dan certificate from Grandmaster Makoto Gima. This rank was confirmed on June 25, 1986, by a 10<sup>th</sup> dan certificate awarded by Seikichi Odo of the Okinawa Kenpo Karate and Kobudo Federation. This represented a tremendous and historic achievement for Trias; very few Americans have ever risen legitimately to the rank of 10<sup>th</sup> dan under the authorization of Japanese traditional karate organizations.

As a result of studying under so many masters, Trias's martial arts background, which he incorporated into Shuri-ryu, included Okinawan, Japanese and Chinese components. Unlike nearly all karate masters today, Trias was totally eclectic in his training. He sought to learn more about karate throughout his entire life, and studied or communicated with an incredible list of karate notables from the 1940's through the 1980's. Like a sponge, he absorbed information from every system with which he came in contact, and he shared this information with his students. He made regular trips back to Japan for that purpose, often bringing 10 or 12 top students with him. His personal photo collection included priceless photos of many famous karate masters, many inscribed personally to Trias. He even claims to have met Choki Motobu before his death in 1944, and Chotoku Kyan, who died in 1945 (possible, but otherwise undocumented). Following is a partial list of the important karate masters Trias claimed to have known and studied with:

Chibana, Chosin (1887-1969), Shorin-ryu founder

Chitose, Tsuyoshi (1898-1984), Chito-ryu founder  
 Eriguchi, Eiichi (?-?), Wado-ryu  
 Funakoshi, Gichin (1868-1957), Shotokan founder  
 Gima, Shinken (Makoto) (1896- ), Shotokan  
 Higa, Seiko (1898-1966), Okinawan Goju-ryu  
 Konishi, Yasuhiro (1895-1983), Shindo-Jinen-ryu founder  
 Kyan, Chotoku (1870-1945), Shobayashi-ryu founder  
 Mitose, James M. (1916-1981), KoSho-ryu  
 Miyagi, Chojun (1888-1953), Goju-ryu founder  
 Motobu, Choki (1871-1944), Okinawa Kempo  
 Nagamine, Shoshin (1907-1997), Matsubayashi Shorin-ryu  
 Nakazato, Shugoro (1921- ), Kobayashi-ryu  
 Obata, Isao (1904- ), Shotokan  
 Odo, Seikichi (1923- ), Okinawa Kempo  
 Ohtsuka, Hironori (1892-1982), Wado-ryu founder  
 Oshiro, Roy (? - ?) Guju-ryu  
 Oyama, Masutatsu (1923- ), Kyokushinkai founder  
 Shimabukuro, Eizo (1925- ), Shobayashi-ryu  
 Shimabukuro, Tatsuo (1908-1975), Isshin-ryu founder  
 Shimabukuro, Zenryo (1904-1969), Isshin-ryu  
 Soken, Hohhan (1889-1982), Shorin-ryu  
 Suzuki, Masafumi (1929- ) Japanese Goju-ryu  
 Taira, Shinken (1902-1970), great weapons master  
 Toguchi, Seikichi (1917- ), Japanese Goju-ryu  
 Toyama, Kanken (1888-1966)  
 Uechi, Kanbun (1877-1948), Uechi-ryu founder  
 Uechi, Kanei (1911-1991) Uechi-ryu  
 Yamaguchi, Gogen (1909-1989), Japanese Goju-ryu

One of the many interesting mysteries surrounding Shuri-ryu is, who was Trias's Goju-ryu sensei? At one time (the early 1960's) roughly half of Trias's system katas were Goju-ryu, and he was referring to his style as "Shorei-Goju-ryu," but he lists no Goju-ryu instructors on his personal *keizu* (martial arts genealogy). At several places in *The Pinnacle* and *The Supreme Way* the statement is repeated that Trias picked up his Goju-ryu katas in 1946, but without saying from whom. John Corcoran (1983), however, states that Trias learned them from Charles Iverson in 1960. Among his Goju-ryu contacts over the years Trias listed the Goju-ryu masters Chojun Miyagi, Masafumi Suzuki, Seikichi Toguchi, Gogen Yamaguchi and Seiko Higa, but for reasons of his own, Trias preferred not to give significant credit to any of them as the Goju-ryu source in Shuri-ryu.

For much of his life Trias referred to his style as Shorei-ryu or as Shorei-Goju-ryu, of the Naha-te lineage. However, he also liked to characterize the style rather inaccurately as a combination of Shuri-te and Hsing-i. Perhaps this is because Choki Motobu, whom Trias considered to be one of his most important sources, was essentially of the Shuri-te and Tomari-te tradition. The katas *Naihanchi*, *Kusanku*, *Ananku*, *Wansu* and *Bassai Dai* are most likely of Shuri-te origin, but Trias's *Sanchin*, *Gekisai*, *Seipai*, *Tensho*, *Nandansho* and *Kururunfa* were decidedly Naha-te. The katas *Gopeisho*, *Danensho* and *Tegatana* were of Hsing-i origin. So, in

fact, Trias's style incorporated elements from all three Okinawan lineages (Shuri-te, Naha-te, and Tomari-te) with Chinese Hsing-i, and some Japanese Shotokan (the *Heian* and *Taikyoku* katas) thrown in for good measure.

Although it was somewhat of a misnomer, Trias changed the name of his style to Shuri-ryu around 1978, with the backing of Makato Gima, for the purpose of "preserving the famous Shuri name." The real purpose was probably to make his style sound a little more coherent and traditional (rather than the modern amalgamation that it really is), as well as to give it a distinctive label which was unique to him as its founder and grandmaster.

In defense of Shuri-ryu as a distinct style, its component *parts* are all taken from indisputably traditional Okinawan/Chinese karate. Trias tried very hard to retain the philosophy and cultural context (including the almost exclusive use of spoken Japanese in class), and to maintain the original forms and techniques. What he did in assembling Shuri-ryu was no different from what other style-founders had done, including Yasuhiro Konishi himself, who assembled his own style (*Shindo Jinen-ryu*) from his favorite aspects of Shito-ryu, Shotokan, Kendo and Aikijutsu. This is exactly the way in which new so-called traditional styles had always evolved in Japan: a gifted practitioner would combine aspects learned from several masters of differing styles, and from them forge a coherent new approach.

Shuri-ryu, it seems, was more or less complete as a system by about 1975. Trias's subsequent senseis, Konishi and Gima, appear to have added little, if anything, to it, though they may well have helped Trias to greatly expand his overall martial arts knowledge. Shuri-ryu has unfortunately never been recognized by the traditional martial arts community as a "traditional" Japanese style, no doubt because Trias was not born Japanese, and did not develop his system in Japan. In all other respects, however, it is as authentic and traditional in adhering to its varied Oriental roots as most of the other Japanese and Okinawan styles currently being practiced, and has distinct advantages over some of them (for example, in its emphasis on performing katas against an opponent to show clearly how the moves are applied in real life, and in its incorporation of grappling techniques).

## **TRIAS'S PUBLICATIONS**

Trias was equally remarkable for his early willingness to publish books on Shuri-ryu karate. These works today are invaluable historical and technical references that trace the development of Shuri-ryu and of Trias himself as a Grandmaster of international stature.

His first book was *The Hand is My Sword*, published in 1958 by Sandmar House, and also in revised edition by Charles E. Tuttle Company, of Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan. The revised edition went through at least five printings from 1973 to 1985. It was basically a beginner's handbook of basic Shuri-ryu karate, and included four katas: Naihanchi Sho, Bassai Dai, Gopeisho and Nandansho. Excellent photo illustrations and good drawings were included.

Five years after the publication of *The Hand is My Sword*, Trias issued another book, self-published, entitled *Karate is My Life* (1963). This, by contrast with the earlier work, was an "advanced black belt instructional manual" intended only for advanced students. (Consequently it is much rarer.) Though poorly illustrated, the contents are quite interesting as a benchmark for the state of evolution of the Shuri-ryu system as of 1963. Aside from the usual matter on history, background and basic techniques, it introduces the short kata forms classified as Ippons, Tazus and Kihons, and the currently practiced katas Taikyoku, Gopeisho, Naihanchi, Sanchin, Tegatana, Tensho, Bassai Dai, Nandansho and Kankusho. Surprisingly, it also includes a number of katas not currently considered to be part of Shuri-ryu: Gakisei, Nekobuto, Kururunfa,

Omoto and Seipai (these are mostly Goju-ryu katas, in keeping with Trias's early reference to his style as "Shorei-Goju.")

In the late 1970's Trias began work in earnest on his *magnum opus*, a thorough description of Shuri-ryu in particular and related aspects of the martial arts in general. In 1980-1983 he issued *The Supreme Way, Philosophy of Karatedo*. In 1980 he issued a companion volume entitled *The Pinnacle of Karate*, which included all empty-hand and also weapons katas in the system. These two books he considered the total and final exposition of Shuri-ryu, though they went through several subsequent revisions.

In addition to karate, Trias was also involved in part-time film-making through his film company, Devi Productions Systems. He actually co-starred in one of the early martial arts films, *Black Karate*, and worked behind the scenes to steer the production of several non-martial-arts films.

Trias's first karate training film was produced in 1963, in association with Canyon Films of Denver. A total of 150 copies were sold at \$85 each. His subsequent educational film, *Okinawan Karate*, was made for the Athletic Institute, and was also purchased by American Airlines for passenger viewing on trans-oceanic flights.

## **U.S. KARATE ASSOCIATION**

Aside from his accomplishments in the creation of Shuri-ryu, in the opening of the first karate dojo in the United States, and in his publications, Trias was also responsible for founding the first American karate federation. His organization, the U.S. Karate Association, grew to worldwide scope and has probably never been surpassed in total membership by any other karate organization in history.

Trias founded the USKA in 1948, just two years after opening his Phoenix dojo. In those days, karate was almost totally unknown in the United States, and Trias simply wanted to find and keep in contact with *anyone* at all who also practiced an Oriental martial art. Karate was truly a lonely field to be in at that time. Total membership fluctuated between 13 and 20 people during the first few years. By 1963 it had risen to 50 black belts and several hundred colorbelts in 20 different schools in the U.S., Japan and the Philippines.

Trias got his first real public exposure for the USKA, oddly enough, through a 1950's article in *Popular Mechanics* magazine. A writer happened to be passing through Phoenix and, since he knew nothing of the martial arts, asked Trias for an interview. That article, said Trias, was what really got the U.S. Karate Association off the ground.

Trias even appeared on television game shows in order to get some national exposure. He was seen on *You Asked for It* in 1962, *What's My Line* in 1969, and *To Tell the Truth* in 1974.

Trias approached other martial arts instructors to become the USKA representatives in their home states. Because Trias had been awarded rank in several styles including Shotokan and Taekwondo as well as Okinawan karate, he structured his organization to be able to include any and all legitimate martial art styles. Each style had its own division within the USKA, headed by the highest ranking member in that style. The division head would appoint three additional board members and together they would be responsible for setting the official standards for their particular style, establishing testing dates and procedures, and awarding USKA-sanctioned ranks in that style.

The USKA encouraged mutual support and the sharing of information between all karateka. It made technical information available on request, urged the support of open tournaments sponsored by non-members, and promoted karate as an intercollegiate and future Olympic sport.



Clinics and instructional seminars were encouraged, demonstration tours were organized, and Association memberships were offered to schools with as few as 40% of their students being USKA members. Perhaps most extraordinary of all, any individual USKA member could enter any USKA-affiliated school in the world (at its peak over 500 schools in 57 countries) and train for up to 30 days free of charge. Many traveling students took advantage of this benefit. As of 1989, the USKA had over 500,000 members worldwide!

In 1963 Trias and John Keehan (known professionally as "Count Dante") promoted the first "World Karate Championship at the Chicago Coliseum. The event continued annually as the "USKA National Championships" until 1968, when it became known as the "USKA Grand Nationals." Trias also sponsored a tournament for professional martial artists, the "World's Hemisphere Championships," in San Antonio, Texas, in 1968.

Because tournaments required standardized rules, Trias wrote the Guidelines and By-laws contained in the official "USKA Rules," first published in 1963. He also officiated personally at many tournaments worldwide (not just USKA events), including the 1972 "W.U.K.O. Championships" held in Paris.

Trias was willing to perform demonstration katas himself at major tournaments. As early as 1964 he performed a sai kata *to music* at the USKA Nationals—he was clearly a man before his time in such innovations that only in the 1990s began catching on in traditional tournaments.

In June 1972 Trias took a small team on a good-will tour of Europe, visiting Germany, Switzerland, France, England and Scotland. He took with him the three top point-scorers in the USKA Grand Nationals: Bob Bowles, Bill Wallace and Parker Shelton; Wally Slocki and Melvin Wise joined the group as well. The 25-day tour was proclaimed a huge success.

Expanding into countries around the world, The USKA established branches known as the SAUSKA ("South American USKA"), the EUSKA ("European USKA"), the AUSKA ("Asian USKA"), the CUSKA ("Canadian USKA), and also the South Africa USKA. Trias was truly egalitarian in his respect for karate-ka worldwide.

It is not our intent to minimize the many great contributions made to Karate by the Okinawans, the Chinese, the Japanese, and others [Trias said]. But here, through the auspices of the United States Karate Association, is an excellent opportunity for the sincere, authentic karate-ka to make his contribution to the spread and improvement of the art of karate throughout the world.

In 1948, with the founding of the USKA, Trias initiated what he called the *Trias International Society*. Inductees were chosen from the ranks of the USKA (by Trias himself until 1973), based on outstanding achievement, competitive spirit, knowledge, ability, and unselfish contributions to the art of karate. In 1973 Trias appointed Parker Shelton of Indiana as president of the Trias International Society. All USKA black belt national champions were eligible, subject to a majority vote of Society members, and many great competitors were elected over the years. Although the Society came to an end with Trias's death, many former members still proudly wear their patch.

Trias was admitted to the *Black Belt Hall of Fame* in 1980, via the *Black Belt* editors' award. He is justly considered to be the "Father of Karate in America" (though the late Ed Parker, who came after him, tried to claim the same title).

## THE GRANDMASTER'S LEGACY

Sadly, the U.S. Karate Association did not survive intact after Trias's death on July 11, 1989. "I am the USKA," he once flatly declared. For several years prior to his death from cancer, Trias had made it clear that his choice of successor as head of the Shuri-ryu system, and therefore de facto head of the USKA, was his daughter, Dr. Roberta Trias-Kelley, 7<sup>th</sup> dan. He had groomed her to take over this position, and everyone knew it. When the time finally came, however, the unity of the far-flung organization could not be maintained.

The Sei Kosho Shorei Kai International held a memorial service for Trias Sensei and presented a funeral scroll to Roberta Trias as the inheritor of the Shuri-ryu system. But an acrimonious power struggle ensued, resulting in the break-up of the organization. Roberta Trias withdrew from karate to a large extent, took the remaining stock of *The Pinnacle of Karate* off the market for a number of years, and the USKA began to dwindle away.

Without the dynamic leadership of Robert Trias, Shuri-ryu as a system fragmented into several more or less independent factions. Roberta Trias-Kelley retained some students and continued to grant dan rankings on rare occasions, under the auspices of the old USKA, Inc. She officially dissolved that organization at the end of 1998 but is still occasionally active in the martial arts and has taught at seminars in Arizona as recently as 2003.

The main branches of Shuri-ryu today are the *International Shuri-ryu Association* (ISA) under former Trias Chief Instructor Robert Bowles, and the *KoSho Centers for the Martial Arts* in Arizona, California and Maine under former Trias Assistant Chief Instructor Johnny Linebarger. The Executive Council of the International Shuri-ryu Association, which together with Hanshi Bowles makes all executive decisions, consists of former Trias Chief Instructors John Pachivas (now deceased), Pete Rabino, Ridgely Abele, Dale Benson, and Michael Awad—arguably the (male) core of Trias's organization at the time of his death. In addition, there is an African-American group under Trias International Society member Woodrow Fairbanks called the *Shuri Karate Association*. There are numerous small splinter groups and various other disseminated dojos as well.

As for Trias's U.S. Karate Association, one section broke off under the leadership of James Hawkes in Albuquerque and David Jordan in Louisiana (former Regional Directors for Trias) to become the independent *U.S. Karate Alliance* (retaining the initials USKA). The USKA consists primarily American karate schools that practice martial arts with a free-wheeling and creative American slant. Another large group followed George Anderson (Trias's Public Relations Chairman and former Amateur Athletic Union Karate Chairman) to become the *U.S.A. Karate Federation* (USAKF). Trias Chief Instructors Robert Bowles, John Pachivas and others who formed the *International Shuri-ryu Association* (ISA) remain unaffiliated with either of the above groups. To complicate matters further, Trias's Northwest Regional Director, Julius Thiery, split off from George Anderson's USAKF in 1995 to form the very successful *USA National Karate-do Federation* (USANKF). The USANKF is rigorously traditional and is supported by much of the traditional Japanese karate establishment in Japan, whereas Anderson's smaller USAKF is more closely allied today with traditional Korean Taekwondo and karate schools under the leadership of American masters. Some members of Anderson's and Thiery's organizations (such as Roger Jarrett) hold dual membership, and some are also members of the *Amateur Athletic Union*. Trias had opposed the AAU when it expanded into karate in the 1970's, in part because it failed to elect him as Chairman, but grudgingly came to accept it in later years.

And that is where matters stand today. National karate championships are held independently by the USKA (usually in Albuquerque), the USAKF (usually in Ohio), the

USANKF (in various cities nationally) and the AAU (in Orlando, Florida). (The ISA holds tournaments as well but does not bill them as “national championships.”) And there are more recent organizations as well, including the International Sport Karate Association (ISKA), the North American Sport Karate Association (NASKA) and others that also hold national championships. There is unlikely ever again to be another American Grandmaster like Trias who is capable of holding together hundreds of thousands of fractious, highly competitive and naturally opinionated karate-ka from dozens of styles worldwide under the umbrella of a single organization.

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