



## **LEGACIES OF THE KOREAN WAR**

Oral History Project

*www.legaciesofthekoreanwar.org*

Interview with:

**Dohee Lee**

First Generation (post war)

Born 1975, Jeju Island, South Korea

Interviewed by:

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### **Pre-War Period**

My name is Dohee Lee and I am a performance artist.

My father's name is Wook Lee and my mother's name is Myung-sook Kang. As I recall, my grandfather and grandmother had passed away by the time I was born. So I have no memory of my grandfather and grandmother. But what I do know is the fact that my grandfather was an independence movement activist, and I remember my father telling me to always remember that. On my mother's side of the family, my grandparents and my mother are from Jeju Island. I was also born on Jeju Island.

...My father always told me, "Your grandfather was an independence activist." He was very proud of that and he wanted me to remember that. My mother's parents went through the 3-3 April Third Massacre. [April 3, 1948, also known as the Jeju or 4.3 Uprising]

My grandfather was an independence activist even before 1910. Japan was occupying Korea for 50 years. You have to go back to the longer history to look back to my great-grandfather, because he was an activist too. I recently found out because I was curious about my ancestors and about this history. My father said, "Your great-grandfather was important in the farmers' movement." I imagine my grandfather also took from his father how they can really protect their country...

My surname is Lee. And we come from the Yeonan Lee Clan. The Yeonan Lee surname comes all the way from the north just south of China. In my estimation, I think about how my ancestors could be linked to those who came down from North Korea. Therefore, my grandfather and great grandfather followed that path (of the Yeonan Lee Clan) down to settling eventually in Jeolla-do. So, my father was born in Jeolla-do, after which the [Japaneses] occupation came, and after experiencing the Korean War, he became a soldier, a professional soldier after the war. My father was born in 1943. So, long after the war, probably around – whose regime was during that time? – it was probably a little before the Park Chunghee regime. At that time, my father was working as a professional soldier in Seoul, then he received orders to be stationed on Jeju Island. It was at that time that my father was able to meet my mother. When the U.S. came into South Korea, they used exactly the same system Japan had. So they didn't really change anything. They just replaced. People who were kind of against the Japanese supported the U.S. – so they're really like supporting Syngman [Rhee] because they felt that U.S. [was] supporting South Korea to be liberated and supported the Korean War. For me, was it really supporting U.S. or taking advantage of the timing?

She [my mother] has the memory of the April 3 Massacre. [April 3, 1948, also known as the Jeju or 4.3 Uprising] That's a very intense massacre story....

My grandfather survived because he gambled. My grandmother was always complaining about his gambling, but that was what actually saved the family. When [South Korean President Syngman] Rhee came in, the majority of Jeju people opposed him, so Rhee called Jeju a communist island, a 'red' island. So did the U.S. Their target was men. They went into each house searching and if the men weren't at home, they assumed they were communists. One time when the ROK military came to the house and asked where my grandmother's young husband was, she said he went gambling. They didn't believe her and came back the next day when my grandfather was there. They asked him where he had been and he said he was with his friend in

a hot place gambling. My mom said she heard that story, and how many people were stood against the wall and killed there. If the military asked a question and the answer wasn't clear, they just killed the person right there. My mom said they survived. That gave me a lot of space to understand what people went through in so many different stories that most people never heard. I'm glad my mom bravely told that story. What if she never shared it? No one really talks about what happened and that's really strange. I went to Jeju. I was born and grew up there. When I was 7 we moved to the mainland because my dad had to serve in the military. We moved to a lot of different places, but every year, I came back to Jeju because that's where I am from and I had to see my grandparents. But I never heard stories and history from my grandparents. Never. I felt a very deep silence among all the neighbors. You never hear any stories.

### **Korean War**

What's interesting to me is that ancestral line, geographically. I imagine that the line came all the way from the North to the South, so I can connect geographically with my ancestors. My father told me about his father because his brother was also part of the student movement. His brother was maybe a high school student. He went out at a very chaotic moment during the Korean War. Northern soldiers came down and Southern soldiers were going up. That was a very confusing moment because they [some of her relatives] had been against the Japanese occupation and supported Syngman Rhee's regime. At that moment there was a gap between those who supported Rhee and those who didn't. I feel like my parents and my grandfather and uncle were on different sides. When the North Koreans came down, they arrested people who supported Rhee. Luckily my grandfather got released, but my uncle didn't. That was the moment when the UN came in to support South Korea. They dropped bombs, and my father told me, "Your uncle was very lucky that that bombing helped him escape." When I heard that, I got more confused about what is what and who is where. This is a personal struggle for me. I also imagine people who are confused about which side you are on. I'm still processing it. It's really interesting.

At that time, 1950, my father was in Gyeongju [coastal city in southern Korea] and my mother was in Jeju. [island south of southern Korea]

...My father really only told me his brother's story. That was the only one I heard from him. My mother was too young – like 3 years old, so she doesn't have a memory from it.

### **Intergenerational Legacies**

Later when I grew up knowing about history, I felt I understood why they had been so silent about it. They didn't want their children to have any tragic life. They didn't tell their stories because they worried that their children would suffer from them. The policy was that if your family member participated in communism, you are implicated by your bloodline and can't get a job. It's kind of like being a criminal. Maybe that's what sealed their mouths. They didn't want to show what they did in the past because if they talked about it, it could be passed down to their children.

There is a name for that policy. It created a huge silence. Something like that is happening in Gangjeong [city in Jeju, site of a current struggle over the construction of a naval base] too. They already experienced it, so they know what they can say and should say....

When I was young, I didn't care about the silence. I just went out and got seafood and just played in the ocean. There were lots of nature activities. I didn't really care much about the stories. But after I grew up, I became curious. I started having questions, but it was too late for me. My grandparfents had passed away. That was a wake up call for me, a little late. If I had gotten the call a little earlier, I could have shared a lot with my grandparents. I could understand their lives more deeply, why they were so silent, and how much they cared about their children and grandchildren. And sometimes it felt too much. You don't need to give too much, but they were just giving and giving. Now that I understand, I want to give back to them. Actually they [her ancestors] came to me when I moved- funny- to the U.S. Maybe that's why they sent me here, to really face the truth about [the U.S.] where all the tragic history started from and who really created the power game in the first place....

I slowly woke up about myself. I grew up. I became more and more connected to people, the community in the U.S., the Korean community. And meeting with them and hearing about what really matters about their lives and why there's so much study[ing] about history and identity. That was my late wakeup call. I looked at myself. Who am I? Why am I here? What am I doing? All these questions guided me back to my ancestors. I want to understand all these relationships. It's ironic. Looking at yourself from [the] outside so that you can see yourself objectively. You can clearly see the relationship between you and another person and between you and your country.

What's happening in Mexico? Israel? Palestine? You open the door more and more and connect to similar stories.

I was born in 1975 on Jeju Island. My father was a soldier, so all my life was spent on a military base in Songtan, Osan. While you are in that environment, you never think about it. I grew up with lots of soldiers. My father didn't want me to participate in student movements. There was a lot of conflict. When I was in college, I was in a circle and participated in a lot of demonstrations. My father was so upset, so I did it very secretly. I love drumming. I just joined this drumming group. I was slowly engaging with my art, with what was happening around me, society, the country. Little by little, I came to understand where I am from and my struggle with my parents, my father's situation with his occupation, which was really serving the country. I am an artist. I always questioned my father about what is going on and what people need to ask about. I want to understand history and my father's history. I talked a little about going to North Korea and my father said, "If you're going to North Korea, you and I are no longer father and daughter." Very extreme. So I had to deal with it. Of course, it's really sad that we had no space for each other or for listening to and understanding each other. If you are brainwashed, it's hard to emerge from that box and look at others, look at what they're thinking about. Because that's his life, over 30 years in the military.

*Interviewer: Say more about the brainwashing because usually people say people in North Korea are brainwashed.*

That's interesting. Maybe it's similar to the military because this polarity [of] good vs. bad, they have taught people "This is good." There is no middle point. This is good, that is bad. And if you go in that direction, you're out....

My political awakening is more like identity, about understanding who I am. That was the moment that I started questioning my grandparents and the land they are connected to. If I connect to that person and that land, there's a story there. That is history. Questioning what happened to this land, what was buried for so long. It's like digging – understanding, questioning why knowing the history of sexually enslaved women is so important to me and why the Korean War is so important. It tells who I am. My identity is not fulfilled yet because this land is divided. My identity is still in process. I want to know another half of Korea so that I can fully understand who I am and all my ancestors who built up the land and created the story. But having half of the land, I feel I need to know the other half, the other half of my identity. So it's more about me, my identity, than politics...

We are a young generation. We never had this Korean war history. So it's easy not to care or talk about it. But for me, my identity brings back the history that's important to know. Knowing my parents and their connection to their parents that spreads out the line of ancestors – that's really the land of Korea. That's why I am researching where my last name comes from. It comes down from North Korea. I'm coming from North Korea or even China. It's kind of how this body of land is connected. I have to follow this vein, this bloodline, to really understand that something was cut and is not fully functioning. Later, when I connect to my sister and brother-in-law and his parents, who are from North Korea, and my niece's grandparents from North Korea, what is this connection? I care about them. I am thinking about this land as my body and how you would feel if it got cut. I am dreaming of what it'd feel like to unite, how I can touch the land and smell the air and feel the wind. It will start with another question, but I want to ask that question. I want to experience it. I want to know....

One of the biggest reasons I decided to have U.S. citizenship is that I really want to go to North Korea one day, see it and feel it, so I can see through my eyes and feel through my skin so that I don't need to imagine....

My wish for North Korea is that all women there will have the right to live their lives as they wish to. This [American] society is also patriarchal and women have to suffer and sacrifice something. But I imagine North Korea might be worse than here. And as a woman, I really want women and children [to] have their rights to be free.

The rights that they can do what they really need to do. So that's what I want to see and I don't know [in] what way that I can support. So for me as an artist, my way to support is doing art so I can express or share what I wish for.

I do art using dance and music and some visual art. All three of these things are from Korea, like the *kut*. [Korean shaman ritual]

I personally got a lot of inspiration from Korean spiritual tradition. It helped guide me to understand who I am and why I am doing this art. I want to dedicate my art to these stories, to the land, to the issues that need attention. The stories I share are about myself too, as a woman talking about sexual slavery and as a Korean woman talking about the Korean war, and as a Korean immigrant woman living in America talking about the relationship between Korea and America. Also talking about women and digging deeper into this spirituality as a shaman. [the Korean shaman or *mudang* acts as an intermediary between earth and spirits] So when I am searching deeper and deeper about the vigor of this goddess/shaman, it guides me to land on Jeju to talk about living as an immigrant woman. I am going to work with Asian American immigrant people to talk about their immigrant stories and how we can create our own myths based on our collective identities in a different land. My next step is to work with immigrant women. I'm looking for the next step in trying to connect the land, like South and North. There's a lot to do, but it's step by step to really understanding.

*Interviewer: When are you planning to go to North Korea?*

I don't know, maybe 2017 or '18. I'm dreaming about it for now. I'm planting the seed to grow. There might be some [family] line that came down. It's really hard finding the older family lines, the trees, after wars and all of the things that burned, you know, the records. So I can't really find out about my grandfather. I only know about him, but I can't find the whole family record.

When I was young, in elementary, middle, and high school, there were painting competitions on the subject of North Korea. We had to draw North Korea as a red wolf. It's a kind of brainwashing. Everyone had to do the same thing. You have to have very clear images of North Koreans. They are the red wolf, not even human. That's how you're brainwashed when you are young. The funny thing was on the other side, the America was a white lamb (laughs). So funny. They are peaceful and very tame. North Korea was like a red wolf, very wild, on the other side. Every year there were competitions, writing and drawing about this. That's how I grew up. North Korea was a bad no-no. There were all these flyers around saying to call 112 if you see a person who is kind of suspicious. There is still a number you are supposed to call. It's a kind of mentality growing up and it's hard to get out of that box. What really got me out of the box was drumming to find the true history and then coming here to really know the stories and history I never heard of.

*Interviewer: Teachers actually told you to draw North Korea as a red wolf?*

They were showing examples, 'This got first place last year.' It wasn't like asking people to imagine. It was showing [concrete] images to start with. What's really missing is imagination. They gave you a certain image, a certain story, so it's hard to imagine because you are always guided...

As a younger generation person, I really want all of us to come up with a question, to imagine. It's not about the news you are hearing on television. We have to question even a simple thing. It's not about heavy issues, but how you respond to nature or the land you've never been to, just questioning what it is like, how the people there are, just simple questions that open up a lot of

possibilities, like what do you eat, what seasonal food do you eat. I want the younger generation to have curiosity. I want to encourage younger people to really talk with their parents and grandparents, asking where they are from and what their memories are. So when they really ask questions, you never know where your parents and grandparents are coming from. I feel that what's really missing is questioning, curiosity – you have to ask directly. That creates another connection to who you really are. This younger generation never had experience [of] – North Korea or the Korean War – but it's still there, and their parents and grandparents still carry those memories. We need to connect. If we want to connect, we have to go directly to them and ask questions. Then we can understand history and [their] lives a little bit, and this land and our bodies too.

*Interviewer: Are you willing to risk going to North Korea even though your father said he will disown you?*

Well, ideally what I want to do is talk to him before doing it, to find a middle point of agreement. Listening and really sharing how you feel and not being against anything – it's about curiosity. I am curious and if I convey my curiosity, maybe he will state his opinion. Whether he says yes or no, I feel like I need to do it. I need to really figure out how to do it and hopefully I can find a way for my parents to understand me. I imagine the older generation who had their experiences can add more detailed information because mine is very short and brief and shallow because I don't know that much about it. So if they can add something to help me understand more, I'm looking forward to hearing their stories. We covered a bit about *Sasam* [April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1948 Jeju Uprising and Massacre] and how that still connects to today. We think history is just a story that happened in the past, like being put away in a box. But I feel that history is a continuing story. We are living in the story and in history every moment. Finding the connection from past history to the present moment, we are already talking about the future. Everything is collapsing at this moment. That's why *Sasam* is important for understanding Gangjeong [Jeju Island] because Gangjeong is about the future. So we need to understand this relationship between time and the stories that people were opposed to or refused to hear. It is important to listen to them. We need to confront them so that we have a better way to reverse this situation....

I am touched by my teacher [Anna Halprin]. She always danced for peace. She went to Israel and works with Palestinian women for peace. She always has this necklace of hands holding each other. When I saw her work and her dedication, I felt like I am holding my country in my heart and that my dedication and my art can give a little support to peace. The entire peninsula, North and South, and Jeju Island are my heart, complete in my body.

When my grandfather was gambling during *Sasam*, the time of the massacre, and this military was searching, asking "Where were you and who were you with?" and asking people, "Were you with him? What time? Where?" the answers had to be the same, and if they weren't right, they would shoot the people right there. My mother said she heard from her parents that a lot of people were [shot] standing against this stone wall. When you go to Jeju, you can see that stone wall. So many people died there – lined up and being shot, dying there. These Jeju people who lived at that time- you can be a woman or man or youth, boy or girl, and they could be a supporter of communists or maybe communists themselves. A lot of confusion. They don't know who is who. If you are not clear about who is who, you just kill them without any clue.

Lots of people died, even babies. There was no humanity there. There were cruel words with quotation marks that “Kill them all – that is a red island. Kill them all or let them kill each other.” I was just crying when I saw “Let them kill each other.” [at the exhibit in Jeju Island about the Jeju Uprising] That is really coming from the U.S. army and the [South] Korean government. They were just sitting there watching them kill each other. It should stop. That’s what’s happening in Gangjeong [Jeju island]now. The U.S. army’s watching us fight each other.