



LEGACIES OF THE KOREAN WAR

Oral History Project

www.legaciesofthekoreanwar.org

Interview with:

Eun-Joung Lee

1.5 Generation [born in Korea, living most of life in U.S.]

Born 1973, Seoul, South Korea

Interviewed by:

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Date of Interview:

May 30, 2015

Cold War Repression

My name is Eun-Joung Lee, and I was born in 1973 in Seoul, South Korea. I'm the daughter of Min Yong Lee, who was featured in the documentary Memory of Forgotten War.

To be quite honest, I watched the film [Memory of Forgotten War] in its entirety for the first time this morning. I watched the twelve-minute clip--the shorter clip—a couple of weeks ago when my parents came to visit me. I heard about it years ago. First, I heard about the oral-history project that Ramsey had started. That was years ago. That's when I first heard that my father was involved in that, and Ramsey had talked with him to tell his story as part of that. And then, I heard that it was being made into a documentary, and then I never heard anything about it again. Then fast forward years later—you know, my father never mentioned it again—and then, I saw a post that Ramsey made on Facebook about the documentary playing in Queens, and I happened to just click on it. I didn't realize that was the one that my father was in, and I clicked on it, and then on the front page is a photo of my father. And I was shocked, completely shocked, because I didn't even know it existed, and when I saw that, I realized, "Oh my goodness, this is out there, and my father hasn't even told us about it, and I haven't even seen it." So, there was that reaction. And then I saw the twelve-minute clip and was just overwhelmed by emotion about the story, and then by the fact that the family had never really seen it, that he never really talked to us about it. I was deeply sad that it had gotten to the point where he didn't even feel like it was important to tell us that this documentary exists and that we should watch it. I don't think that he thought it was not important but that he didn't feel at liberty to talk about it. And so, when I asked him, you know, "Why didn't you tell us that this was out? I would have wanted to see it," his reaction was that "It's very political."

I remember my mother was also in the same room when we were talking about this, and I asked her, you know, "Have you seen it?" And she said, "No, I don't want to see it." And I was shocked, and I said, "Why don't you want to see it?" And she said, "I don't want to be reminded about the war." And that's when I understood it's hard subject matter, you know, for my mom especially, to revisit that.

And my father, you know, talking to him a little bit more and trying to understand why [he] couldn't even tell the family, he said, "Well, you know, it's a very political issue. It's still a political issue. I can't even tell my closest friends, because it's still so political." And at first I just didn't understand that. I couldn't comprehend, you know. [I thought], "This is something that you should be proud of. You know, you get to tell your story, and as your own daughter, I would love to hear about the story and tell my friends about it and people out there want to hear the story." So I didn't get the political nature of it. I don't think I appreciated it at first. But talking to [him] more about it, I came to understand just how entrenched even talking about the Korean War—North Korea—is such a volatile, such a sensitive topic, not so much with my peers but certainly with my parents' generation. And I think the way it's talked about in the media, especially the South Korean media, it's sensationalized, as any mention of North Korea or having any interest in North Korea is automatically, immediately deemed as pro-communist. It's a very black-and-white dialogue, and I didn't appreciate that until very recently—how hard it was just to have a real conversation about it and not have it be hyperbolic and immediately [about] taking sides. I'm only starting to understand that in the start of my own journey of self-education around it.

So even this whole process of discovering the documentary, even though it had been out there in the world for a couple of years now, you know, having it come to San Francisco and be part of the San Francisco Asian American Film Festival and then having it completely off of my radar and not even knowing that it was here, while I was living here, my first reaction was [that] I'm just ashamed that it took me this long to understand that it's out there and that I hadn't seen it. It's not so much a matter of shame, but it's more a matter of "OK, it's out there. What is my relationship to it, and what does this mean for me now in the context of who I am now?" And I just look forward to being able to talk about it more with my father, with my mother hopefully if she wants to be part of the dialogue, and then with my siblings. My younger sister has seen the short version. I don't think she's seen the full version. And I don't believe my older sister has seen it. And the three of us—the three sisters—we haven't had a chance to talk about it, and that's something that I really want to happen, the three of us to be able to just talk frankly about it.

[After seeing the movie,] I felt a mix of emotions. First of all, just immense pride that my father was a part of it and that he had the chance to tell his story. I also felt just a deep sadness about his story of having suffered so much and the story of being separated from his family. And also another level of sadness that he feels so restrained in being able to even talk about it inside his own family and then amongst his friends and colleagues and peers.

It also made me really curious about.... OK, I need to learn my history. You know, even though I was a history major in college, I need to revisit those books and dive back into what happened. And there's so many interpretations, right, of the Korean War? And I need to educate myself much, much more on the topic and learn so that it's not this remote part of me. I mean, I was thinking about like I would not exist had the Korean War not happened in the way it had. For example, if war had not broken out and the thirty-eighth parallel drawn up and my father not able to visit his family in North Korea—I mean, if the war had not happened—me and my sisters simply would not have existed, right? So in that way it's this sort of existential observation of, "Wow, if the Korean War hadn't happened, then we wouldn't exist in this form."

But also thinking about all of the stories that my sisters and I heard growing up, the bits and pieces. We never heard the complete story end to end, but we would hear bits and pieces from our mother, our father, about the war and then surviving it and our story of immigrating to the U.S. Just knowing those stories exist and that we're part of that—it makes me feel incredibly grateful and just able to appreciate my parents' journey through this in making our lives possible, my sisters and I. What different lives we would have lived had we stayed in Korea and not immigrated, had we not been born obviously. It's kind of mind-blowing when you start to think about all the different events that happened and the road that could have been taken or the choices that could have been made that weren't made that led us to this moment in time. Those are some of the things I started to think about. I'm so proud of him. I mean, foremost, this whole experience is that I just want to jump up and down and go, you know, "Yay, Dad." A part of me wishes that I had paid more attention, to be quite honest, back when we were younger when he would, in starts and fits, sort of tell us pieces of the story, but you know, when we were younger, it was almost like we didn't have the patience to hear him out. And he would get very emotional and very passionate, and it was almost like we would shut down, or you know, speaking for myself, I would almost put this filter on when I knew that he was going into

Korean War storytelling mode. And maybe part of it is just being in your teens and being impatient about stories like that. But I think looking back, there's a part of me that probably wanted to not really hear his story because there's so much pain behind that. And you know, I'm starting to feel it now as I talk about that. I don't think at that age, you know, I wanted to admit or recognize how much pain was part of his life and my mother's life.

I mean, my mother—I wish she had a chance to tell her story, but she's a lot shyer than my father. I think it would be really difficult to get her to tell her side of the story. You know, her mom lost her leg during the Korean War. A U.S. bomb fell, and then, her mom, when she was in her early twenties lost her leg and was shut indoors for years pretty much after that, because at that time in Korea, if you were handicapped or disabled, you weren't allowed outside. And so that forced my mother, the oldest of four girls, to grow up very quickly. She didn't have a childhood. She had to go out, you know, at the age of six or seven or eight and do the grocery shopping, negotiate with the market ladies. When I think about her story, there's so much pain there, and I wish we could just really talk about it at will instead of waiting for a time when we're mature enough or wise enough or ready enough. But you know, these things—they take their time, as they will. It's not too late.

Emigration from Korea

I don't think I remember precisely the event of immigration. I was three years old, so it was 1976, and what I've been told in terms of the reason why we moved—why we immigrated.... My mother's side of the story is that it was the Vietnam War, and people in Korea were nervous that the war would spill back over into Korea. People were feeling unstable with the Vietnam War going on, and my mother was trained as a nurse. And so, that's what enabled us to get a visa fairly easily and immigrate to the U.S. because there was a shortage of doctors and nurses in the U.S. at the time.

My father's story of why we immigrated to the U.S. is that he was a very young professor at Dongguk University, a professor of Buddhist philosophy. And he was a very popular professor. He, you know, was at the top of his school, top of all of his classes, but he was denied tenure, and he believes it was because of his family background and ties to North Korea—that the academic community knew about that and didn't want to help his career. And he felt very hampered in Korea in the ability to pursue a career given that political situation. So he wanted to start anew, to literally start a new life in the States. And then my mother's profession as a nurse helped and allowed us to move to the U.S. with a visa.

So we moved to Atlanta, Georgia where my aunt and uncle lived. This is my mother's younger sister [who] had already moved to Atlanta, Georgia, so that's where we moved. And we first moved—my parents, myself, and my older sister. My youngest sister stayed behind. She was an infant, and we learned later that that was one of the most difficult decisions that my parents had to make. They simply didn't feel that they could manage three children—three very young children—in the process of immigration to the U.S. so they sent for her after we were more established, and my younger sister joined us when she was five years old.

I was three years old. My memory's really patchy. One of the earliest memories I had—I was too young to go to school at the time, and I remember going with my mom to house visits she would do as a nurse. And she would go to these seniors' homes to administer their shots, and I would tag along with her. And even at that age—you know, three, four years old—I was conscious of a tension in that room when she would go to a women's home to administer the shots. I didn't understand what was going on. You know, I didn't understand English, but I could tell that there was so much tension in that room, and only years later I came to understand that that tension was racism, that they weren't treating my mom well. And even though I was maybe pre-verbal or not speaking English at the time, I felt it. I absolutely absorbed that tension and knew that something was wrong, but I had no way to understand what it was at that age. I just remember—there's one memory of a senior, an older woman: my mom giving her her shot and some words being said and just knowing whatever she said, whatever the woman said to my mother was bad, because it made my mother feel bad and I felt uncomfortable. But I don't know what those words were. I just remember like all of a sudden it was tense in the room and that it was a bad place to be.

I didn't know any other life than growing up in, you know, Atlanta in the late seventies. As far as I remember, I think I had a pretty happy childhood. My friends were, at that time—the schools that I went to were, you know, half white, half black, [and a] handful of Asians like us. And my friends were about, you know, equally half black, half white, and handful of Asians. And I think for the most part we had a good childhood. I know my father went from being a university professor to working at a cash register in the equivalent of a 7-Eleven. [I] think it was called the Magic Market. And one of my earliest memories is after school going to the Magic Market, and my dad would give us these little toys like a Matchbox car from the store, and we'd go play with it down in the basement after school. So he did that for a couple of years, and my mom was a nurse, and they saved up enough money to open up their own small business....

Korean War Memories

[Eunjoung's father left North Korea during the Korean War while her mother's family was in South Korea during that time.]

...The story of our grandmother—our mother's mother—losing her leg during the war: a U.S. bomb dropping, our grandmother losing her [leg] and then being shut inside, and then hearing about how our mother, the oldest of four, had to go out and do the grocery shopping and do pretty much everything that her mother couldn't do, leaving the house. So that was probably one of the main stories that I remember about the war directly.

On my father's side, I remember hearing the same story several times but then not really comprehending it until later versions of it. Maybe part of it is that I wasn't interested, you know at a younger age, to really hear and then maybe being a little bit more open to hearing it at an older age. The story of being, you know, not able to go back across the border. He was on the south side of the border with two of his siblings—and the rest of his family being in the North and not being able to cross back and forth and having all communication cut off. So that was kind of the main narrative of not being able to see family.

And also, the story of his mother, at one point being so depressed and just hopeless, feeling hopeless, that she at one point walked into the Han River to drown herself. I mean, they were incredibly poor and hungry. They didn't have enough to eat and [were] just really struggling to survive. And then, her stopping and my father telling the story of why she stopped herself from drowning herself because she suddenly remembered, "If I leave, then what will happen to Min Yong? What will happen to my youngest son?" And then, coming back out of the river and not taking her life so that she could care for him. So, that was one of the big stories that I remember hearing.

And then, also stories about how one of his older sisters that was with him on the south side—how she essentially sacrificed her own education so that he could get an education. She's my favorite gomo [paternal aunt]. So, you know, just learning that about her and the sacrifices she made so that her brother could get an education. We would hear bits and pieces, but we never heard the whole story.

And I think even back then, there was some kind of feeling that for my parents' side that they didn't want to burden us with the story, that it's too depressing, it's too sad, [and] that all of that is in the past. "We should live our lives and make the most of what we have now. Why revisit the past?" I think that's still very much my mother's take on all of it. Her reluctance to talk about it is "Why revisit the past? Why revisit such a depressing part of your story?" And I understand that. But as I get older, I'm hungry for more stories. I want to hear the truth of what happened because that is so much a part of who I am.

I don't think I actually sat down and [asked them to tell me their whole life story], although I have friends, Korean American friends, who maybe through a school project or a school essay, they had kind of an excuse to do that. And I'm kind of jealous. I wish I had come up with an idea to interview [my] parents about the Korean War, where I would have an excuse to sit down and, you know, ask them the questions. But I haven't done that.

I'm not really sure I know what his reaction is to the film. We haven't like talked directly about, you know, "What did you think of the documentary?" But when we talk about the documentary, he often talks about how difficult it is for him to talk about his role in the documentary even to his closest friends because of the political nature of it—because he knows that they will feel uncomfortable about the North Korea piece. And that's really sad and alarming for me—that he can't even communicate with his friends and peers about it, that it's still such a taboo topic. I think that's really unfortunate, but I feel that his hesitation and self-censoring in talking about it has also spilled over into his ability to talk about it with his own family. I think his sensitivity to how political it is also informs how he talks about it with his own family and that makes me really sad and I want to do everything I can to try to remove that obstacle however way I can.

Family Reunion

We knew [that my father went to North Korea]. He didn't tell us much at all. If it was 2000 that he went, fifteen years ago, I think I was in Boston then. I vaguely remember him talking about—you know, he has permission to go to North Korea and to reunite with surviving family members. And I remember thinking that that's incredible. That's really exciting. And he went,

and I remember when he came back, he brought some footage with him. He brought a video camera. We didn't see any of the video footage. He didn't show us. But he did take some photographs, and we saw the photographs. And he talked a little bit about it. And maybe it's because I wasn't living at home at the time—I forget what city I was living in—but I feel like even with that monumental visit, I didn't get the whole story. I got bits and pieces, you know? They started writing letters. He started writing letters with surviving family members in North Korea, and then he was able to get permission to go. I think he had to first become a U.S. citizen in order to actually go to North Korea. And I remember thinking, you know, the irony of that. That's crazy that you, you know, as a South Korean, it's way more difficult to go versus being a U.S. citizen. And I remember he went with one of our gomos, our older gomo, "Keun Gomo" [oldest paternal aunt], as we call her. The two of them had a chance to go, and I remember him talking about the emotion of seeing them. Like I remember my first question was, "What was it like? What was it like to see your brothers that you haven't seen in so many years?"

It's been fifty years. And you know, feeling the emotion behind his answer, I couldn't fathom what it must have felt like after fifty years of separation. And then, he had another chance to visit. I can't remember if that first trip he went with my mother, if my mother was a part of that trip, or if that was the second visit. So she had a chance to go with him, as well. And she's very reluctant in talking about that also. I mean, I think she kind of complained about how hard life is there. But I didn't get really an emotional read from her in terms of that visit. I have cousins there [with whom] apparently I have no contact, no communication.

I imagine my father took some photographs of our family to show them, and then I've seen a few of the photographs that he's brought back, but other than that I have no contact with them. I don't feel like I have any relationship with them. I don't feel a connection with my North Korean side of the family. And then, I learned that one of his brothers, the one where there's a photograph of him, reuniting with him [in the film]—he passed about five years ago.—and just feeling deeply sad that my father didn't have another chance to see him again, that I didn't have.... I, for some reason, thought, "Oh maybe, you know, there's a chance where I could go and visit and see him."

And I'd still like to make that trip one day and see who I can meet up with on that side of the family. I would like that. If I have the opportunity to meet them, to meet my cousins, I guess I won't know until I meet them [if I feel a connection]. But the idea of having family in the North—it feels abstract. I think maybe it might feel more real if I had had photographs of them while we were growing up just to kind of see the passage of time—see them getting older—but I don't have any of that really. So the fact of them—the concept of them is real—but I don't yet feel an emotional connection, because we never really talked about it as a family.

I mean, when I talk with my gomos, my father's two sisters that stayed on the south side, you know, I want the chance to be able to—and they're in their eighties—I want to have a chance to interview them and talk to them and, you know, kind of plumb them for their stories, their recollections of what that family was like before it's too late. I know very little about this family on the north, like they're kind of this abstract, imaginary family. I don't know their names. I don't know how old they are. I just know that there were four sisters and three sons—

four daughters and three sons. So, it feels distant. It feels distant. It's just too bad because they're my family. I mean, they're flesh and blood, right?

I think it would have made a difference if there had been greater frequency in talking about it. I think it would have been helpful to have started hearing about it even at an early age, in terms of, you know, maybe not the heavy stuff of the war because that's—that's hard to process as a kid. But even knowing that you have family members on the north and that they have names—like a little bit more about who they were as people. Having some stories of who they were as people would have been helpful I think, even when we were kids because then, we [could] start to see them as real people, as extensions of the family. But I'm sure it would have been incredibly difficult for my father to talk about that because he was so young when war broke out.

I think, you know, his memory of many of his siblings were also limited and on top of that, just painful to talk about. You know, in the documentary, he talks about how it was a, you know, tactic of survival when he was a kid. He had to not think about that side of his family and block them out. So I'm not sure how he would have been able to talk about that side of the family with us when it took him a long time to also think about them and think about them as part of this family.

What are other ways? I guess it's just greater frequency and then hearing more actual stories of who they were as people. Over time, that would have been helpful. Maybe you know, revisiting some of these photographs more with us, you know, putting them in a family album so that we could flip through them, and they're part of a family album versus, you know, in the separate folder.

I was aware that I only had pieces of the story and that certain topics seemed to be taboo. I somehow internalized at an early age that anything related with North Korea was a taboo topic. I just felt that, you know—that's a topic that's not easy to talk about. And when you're young and you sense that something's tense, you want to avoid it. And so, I knew there were holes, but I think when we were young, we just weren't that interested—like we were too busy growing up and dealing with our own lives. Our parents' past didn't seem as relevant, and I guess I wasn't as curious about it until a later age.

I mean, even when I was in school in Chicago in college, I majored in history, in East Asian history at first, and we learned about, you know, we covered the Korean War in our East Asian Civ. class. But even at that point, it didn't occur to me to go back to my parents and say, "Sit down, let's talk about the war. I want to hear the full story"—like that never occurred to me, and it's too bad that I kind of missed that opportunity. I mean, it's not too late, but that would have been nice to do while I was learning about the Korean War in class.

Intergenerational Legacies

On one level, I think it's [Korean War] profoundly affected and shaped who I am—for example, my relationship with my younger sister. So I mentioned earlier that she came to the U.S. and joined us at a later age. In the beginning, my parents came with myself and my older sister and

then sent for my younger sister later. And so, my younger sister was raised by our grandmother on my mom's side.

And you know, I remember distinctly it was one Christmas—I forget how old I was exactly—but our grandfather on my mom's side came with my youngest sister and brought her. And I remember thinking, "Who is this? I have a younger sister?" I mean, I'm sure my parents tried to explain to us, "You have a younger sister. She's joining us. You know, she's part of the family." But I remember, you know, I was young—I must have been six or so at the time—thinking "I'm the youngest in the family. What do you mean there's a younger sister below me that, you know, I have to be an eonni [older sister] to?" I remember things did not go well [laughs]—like I was not happy with the situation. [Laughs] Of course, you know, there was jealousy. There was just, you know, resistance and all of that. And I remembered like upon meeting her thinking, "Okay, so I've been instructed to be nice to this person. Why? I've got to share my toys and clothing with her?" and just resenting it. And I think that, you know, that unfortunately had shaped the foundation of my relationship to my younger sister that really persisted through the years.

And I can say, you know, when we were young, we fought a lot, and I always thought of it as normal fighting between siblings when you're young. But I think that was absolutely affected by the fact that I didn't really know her until I was six. And that's a direct legacy of the Korean War. You know, my relationship with my sister was profoundly shaped by that.

And only now, you know, now that we're older, I feel lucky that I've had a chance to just talk to her about that. I actually had an opportunity recently to formally just apologize to her and really get it off my chest and say, you know, "I know I've been a crappy sister for most of our lives, and I think I finally figured out, like, what the genesis of that was, which was—and I don't think I could have really admitted it even to myself until recently—is that I resented you. I resented the existence of you for so long because of the way in which you came into our lives at a much later age, and I didn't really understand that, really until now. And can we start again? You know, I'm so sorry for holding onto that resentment."

And so, I feel lucky that I've had the opportunity to like recognize it and then do something about it and actually talk to her about it and get her forgiveness and, you know, fortunately I feel like we have a better relationship now because we were able to kind of have that honest discussion. But, you know, and maybe this is a whole other story, but I know that for her, it was incredibly difficult growing up, joining the family at a later age. I mean, she was essentially abandoned by our family when the rest of us left for the States and she stayed behind with our grandmother. I'm sure the feeling of abandonment was really strong, and that's shaped who she is. And that's a legacy of the Korean War—my parents having to make this awful decision and her life being, you know, the course of her life being set by that decision. And I'm sure so many families have similar stories like that. But that was our family.

Hopes for the Future

My father's been active in reunification efforts throughout the years, and I think that his involvement, his take on the war and coming at it from this humanitarian perspective of, you

know, politics aside - this is a red herring, it's hugely political, and people get upset about North versus South - that aside, he's really worked his life to focus it as a humanitarian issue in terms of reunification. And I think that over time has affected my view of the war, and more recently it's informed my interest in, you know, 'What can my generation do about the war now?'

I mean—technically the war's not over. What is my role in it in terms of, you know? ...Is reunification even possible? Probably not in my father's lifetime, but in our lifetime? ...What does that even look like? What's my role in it as someone who's grown up in the U.S. for most of her life? You know, I speak broken Korean. I have ties to Korea, but what's my place in it? What's my role in it? So, these are questions that I've been kind of actively thinking about—thanks to your documentary [Memory of Forgotten War] and just more recently and something that I think I want to dive deeper into. I think there's definitely a place for second-generation people in terms of facing what the impact of the war has been about. I just don't know exactly what that is, but you know, I believe that there are people out there very active in that, and I want to learn more.

I've met some of my father's friends. I know his reluctance in telling some of his closest friends about his involvement in this documentary. I think some of it's probably warranted in terms of what I talked about previously—about how sensitive it is, how politically divisive it is. I think he's right that it is politically divisive. But I also wonder, you know, [if] maybe he's not giving them enough credit, that if he were to approach it in a, you know, non-confrontational way and talk about it in terms of his personal story, maybe they would be receptive to hearing it. Because I'm sure many of them have suppressed a lot of their own stories about it, and maybe they also want an outlet to talk about it. Because for years, so many of them have not talked about it. I mean, just look at my own family. We haven't talked about it. So there's a lot of repression there going on in terms of talking about it, and it would be interesting to see what comes out, like what would actually get released. What's the worst thing that can happen if he tells his friends about it? I mean, maybe the worst thing that could happen is that they no longer want to be friends with him so that's one risk. But I bet, you know, as they're getting on in their years, they might be open to having a dialogue, having a discussion about it. But it all depends on how it's done, you know? And I think my dad—because of his approach in terms of this as a humanitarian issue versus making it into a political thing—I think he has a good chance, good opportunity, to talk about it.

But it's hard for me to say, because, you know, my Korean is not as fluent, and I don't know the depth of what this means for people of my father's generation. But it would be a really interesting experiment to just ask the question or have him broach the subject and just see what happens. I bet that the risk is much less than what he imagines it to be and that the reward is much greater. I bet a few tears would be shed, but I bet a lot of good stories would come out of it too.

Interviewer: Did he indicate whether the film so far has caused any trouble?

[My father] hasn't alluded to that. I think, you know, sadly his tactic has been not talking about it, which to me is, [like], "Are you kidding me?"

You know, this [this oral history project] is a wonderful learning opportunity for so many people. It's an educational tool, and we should use it as a conversation-starter to continue the conversation, to deepen the conversation. So I think it's absolutely, you know, an opportunity to talk about it. There seems to be so much shame in talking about it and taboo around talking about it, which is too bad, because I feel like it's their generation that cares, that obviously lived it. They care the most about it whereas our generation—we're that much more removed. And once they go, then you know, it's going to be more difficult for our generation to really engage with it in a way that they can engage with it now while they're still alive.

I've been, you know, posting on social media and Facebook and kind of loudly trumpeting it [my father's participation in Memory of Forgotten War], like "This is my dad, I'm so proud of him." And the response has been really positive. You know, my friends—my Korean American friends especially—have been really excited for me and for my father. Some of them have met my father and, you know, they're really excited to see it and have been asking, "Where can we get a copy [of the film]? Where can we see it?" So that's been really good to get that response, and then for me to be able to take that response of my friends and then share it back with my parents, with my father and mother and say, "Hey, you know, you're famous. You know, my friends think you're cool." So that's been really lovely to just be able to share the enthusiasm and excitement of my friends and feed it back to my father and say, "You know, you should really talk about this. Don't be ashamed of it. This is something to celebrate." That's been really wonderful, and you know, an excuse to brag to my friends about my family. That's [laughs] always nice.

CNN came a couple of weeks ago to interview my father. They saw a clip of him in the documentary that you made, and they contacted him through Ramsey and asked, you know, in the context of I think the seventieth anniversary of the Korean War, they wanted to do a piece on CNN.com about the Korean War. And so, the film crew came and Kyung Lah was the CNN correspondent. She's also Korean American and second-generation. [Lah is actually 1.5 generation, born in Korea and raised in U.S.] It was interesting to talk with her because she and I share very, very similar Korean American immigrant growing-up stories. And she also has family, I believe, in the north so it was great to swap stories about that and just connect on that level. They were very much interested in the personal side of the reunification of my father with his siblings. And so the questions were very much focused around, "What was that experience like for him—the moment [of] reunification with his brothers in North Korea?"

And after that happened, after the taping ended, you know, I asked my father, "How did that feel for you? How did that go?" And he said it went fine but that he was disappointed that the questions seemed to be so focused on the emotional drama of being reunited with his family in North Korea. And yes, there's a lot of, you know, emotion involved in that, but that he felt uncomfortable in that it just focused too much on kind of sensationalizing that side of it.

I don't know if I'm explaining this well. And I remember asking the correspondent, you know, "Why did you choose my father?" And one of the things she said was, you know, "We really liked his energy and the humanistic story that he was telling." For example, one of the other people that was featured in your documentary, he was just too angry. [Laughs] And I remember thinking, "Okay, well you know, you're CNN. You're not going to allow any kind of politicized

story of the Korean War. And you're going to want to really try to focus it on the humanistic side." I didn't tell her that, but I get that. So I think it's a good thing that CNN wants to tell this story. It reaches a broader audience, a more mainstream audience. And if they can hear more stories of families reunifying with other family members in the north, then that's great. But my hope is that, you know, people would be interested in learning about the broader story too—not just about "Oh, it's so great that these families got to reunite" but did you also know that the war isn't technically over and to learn more about the history. So that's my hope—[that] it might prompt someone to dig more into the history.

Intergenerational Legacies

Interviewer: Any final comments or thoughts?

It was really good to talk about it [my father's story and the film], and I didn't know what [feelings] would come up for me. You would think that by word of mouth, my father would see it [the movie]. But, I mean, that's a testament to the war itself—that he wouldn't be excited to have us see it. That kind of speaks volumes for me. But you know, I don't know how specific that is—how unique that is—to our family. I'd be curious to learn, you know, the other people that you interviewed for that documentary—what the experience was like for the rest of their family members. I forget his name, but the one that after he had a chance to reunify with his family, he [Suntae Chun] led many more—I think he led, like, thirty-five families. I would love to hear, you know, how did the rest of his immediate family respond to his involvement in the documentary? Hopefully he was more communicative about it than my father was. [Laughs]

I definitely learned some things. I saw photographs that I hadn't even seen previously to this documentary—the ones where he was younger, the black-and-white photos of his older siblings. Some of those I hadn't seen. And I think there were a few black-and-white photos of my parents when they were very young but married. I hadn't seen a couple of those. And just other stories, again, that my sisters and I had not heard. The point about when he talks about how he was denied tenure—I technically didn't know that that was a big issue until it was in your documentary. And then this morning when I was on the phone with him, he also referred to that. And that was the first time I heard about that as a reason why they chose to immigrate to the U.S. And the story when he talks about the South Korean soldiers visiting his home. He's talked about that story before and the fear that he had, but this was the first time where he specifically said how he was made to feel like a criminal in his own home—the way that they just came into his home and questioned him and his family.

It's such a bizarre experience watching your father on screen, telling you stories that are familiar, yet new. That was unexpected.

I'm in my early forties now so I think just mellowing out and wanting and being more curious about my history. The older I am, the more forgiving I think I am of myself, and it's this interesting process of - the more that I accept myself and my own flaws, the more I open up about the rest of the world and other people.

Like it's this wonderful different-sides-of-the-same-coin experience. Just not taking myself as seriously as before and accepting all of my flaws allows me to be more naturally curious about other people's stories, especially my own family's stories and getting to the truth of things versus trying to filter out the censored, safe version of a story to protect myself from God knows what—from too much pain. So for me, the change, the shift in my wanting to learn more about it has been about me just becoming more comfortable with myself and not fearing so much the truth—whatever the truth is and however painful the truth is. And I guess that's because I feel more secure in my place in my own family, my relationship with my younger sister that I talked about and then just feeling more secure about my place in the world at large.