



## **LEGACIES OF THE KOREAN WAR**

Oral History Project

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Interview with:

**Insook Lee**

First Generation

Born 1938, Icheon, Gyeonggi Province

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### **Japanese Colonial Period**

I was born in 1938. I am 76 this year. I was born in Icheon, Gyeonggi Province, in South Korea. There was just one Korea. When I was born and growing up, there was no South and North. There was no two Koreas. In 1945, I was in 1st grade. In March, I think, I entered school. And then in August, we had the liberation.

I was eight years old when we had that liberation. I had Japanese name, of course, even before I entered the school. Because I had siblings, big brothers and big sisters. And I was very curious about what my Japanese name will be. And I kept asking them. And they told me, In-shoku, yeah In-shoku. Why, I cannot recall my last name, family name. Wow. And really, I cannot recall anything special. But I was concentrating on learning Japanese alphabet. And my mom told my big sister, you teach Insu Japanese language. Because, she went to school.

We had a big family. My parents, my two sisters, two brothers, two sister-in-laws. And nephews and nieces. We lived in a big house. So it was sort of complicated environment. I was the youngest. But because I had nieces and nephews, my father could not express his affection to me. Even [though] I was the youngest. And you know, I always think I really needed that. I needed, you know, my father's affection, too. Too many other children. In front of his daughter-in-laws, how could he express? In Korean tradition, it was hard for him to express his affection.

My parents were farmers. My father worked very hard. He was a hard worker. And he had big farms. And we always had two workers who lived all the time with us. And they were helping my father farm. And he didn't have much education. But he loved reading. He loved to write poems. Maybe that's why I like poems. My father would, you know, recite Chinese poems. He would just make it up. I couldn't understand the meaning. But he loved to recite Chinese poems.

My house was a thatched roof house. And in those days, very few people had roof - tiled roofs. And I always, you know, envied the people who had tiled roofs. Because they were really rich people.

There were two houses for us. Because you know, my brothers - two brothers - lived right next to our - next door.

### **Liberation from Japan**

August 15th, people in our village, especially the young people, they were so happy. They were excited. And they were shouting. "The Japanese is going back to their own country." And the young people, whole bunch of young people from our village, they were running to the elementary school where I was attending. And still I feel sorry, and I feel bad. When they went to school, elementary school, they were breaking all the window glasses, window panes. They were so happy, and they were so excited. Maybe they thought this is built by the Japanese people. I don't know. That happened on that day. And I heard that the Chief Police, he committed suicide on that day. And I felt - I was scared, and I felt bad, too, because he died. Of course, we were not friends. But when I heard the Police Chief died, my parents were quiet. They were calm. And the young people, they were the ones were very - so excited.

### **Pre-War Period**

We had to go to school. And there were not enough notebooks. No paper at all. And no erasers. And I was in need of notebooks so badly. I was asking my sister, who usually was helping me. My mom was always too busy outside. Farming, and all that other stuff. Other work. And my sister-in-law couldn't do anything. And then she took down a roll of wallpaper. And this is the only paper that we have. And she cut them in squares, and then made a notebook. This is all we have, yeah.

In those days, paper was so scarce. No paper at all. And I was 5th grader.

### **Korean War Memories**

I was a 5th grader when the Korean War broke. It was morning, June 25th. And we heard the news that there was a war. But that's what people kept saying, you know, around my house. There is a war. War broke. But I didn't know what it [war] is. How serious that was. And a few days later, my sister who married and lived in Seoul - they all came to our house. They were the refugees. They walked from Seoul to our village to escape the war. To escape from the communist soldiers. Our town - our village was a remote village. It was quite away from - from the main highway of Korea. Until then, I haven't seen any Red Armies. The North Korean Armies, until then, I haven't seen.

Oh when the Communists occupied most of the parts of our area, I was very little, I was so surprised to learn that one of our villagers became the Chief of the town. Yeah. And people who thought they were oppressed, they were rising up, [saying] "We welcome the Communists", like that.

My brother, one of my brothers was elementary school teacher. And he had to help. He had to work for the Communists. What can he do? And I went to school every day. And what they taught was only songs, North Korean songs, Which I still remember, because every - all the students would sing. They were singing every day, you know. Two or three songs.

And then in September, the U.N. soldiers were pushing out. And when the South Korean soldiers came up, we were singing other songs. We learned other songs.

Just before the U.N. soldiers pushed up, [we saw]. Village people, they had no idea. They were busy working in the fields, or working at home. They were not paying any attention to strange looking people.

When I was playing outside, I saw some stragglers. Later, I figured out they were the stragglers. Five or six. They were in line, and they were walking away from our village, through our village. And one day I was playing at my aunt's place right next door. And there came one man, from the back door of the kitchen. And he was asking - he was actually begging to my aunt, to give him something to eat. And my aunt was very innocent person. "I don't have any rice, you know. But I have only barley." "Oh" he said, "oh, yes." And "ton of leaf pickle. This is all we have", she said. My aunt was very poor. And, "Oh, that's fine. Let me eat that." And then he was gulping that. He was running, and they came in there. And then he ran away. So later I thought he must be happy. He must have been one of the stragglers. North Korean soldier, yeah. Yeah

that was when the North Korean soldiers were retreating. So around that time I saw five or six, you know, people. They were in line, and they were passing our village. But the villagers paid no attention. They didn't know. Everybody was working hard in their fields. My parents were working hard in the field.

And then soon, when in September the U.N. soldiers and South Korean army came up, the sad thing happened. They were all arrested. My brother was also arrested. He was put in jail for many days. Because he helped the North Korean army, yeah. In his school, he taught the songs and those. What can you do? He had to.

When he came up [was released from prison], he was telling us how bad the hunger was. Yeah, he was so hungry. And they were giving them you know, the rice - rice ball. And that was not enough, just a small rice ball. And then sometimes the people were having the lice. And sometimes lice was on top of the rice. He was having hard time.

But soon he [my brother] was set free. My father visited the police department so often. And he didn't do anything, he was just teaching the kids the songs and all those. He begged them to set his son free. And then finally he was set free.

And some of our village people, they were imprisoned because her husband - a lady whose husband was Communist even before the June 25th. He was always active with his friends, in the circle. A Communist circle. And then his wife was working really hard, happily, when the Communists came down.

And then when they - when they [North Korean forces] were pushed back, the village people, and the town people, they knew he was, and she was really the Communist. And oh, they did all kinds of cruel things to her. So war is really terrible - terribly bad. They took off all the - they made her naked. South Korean, the police department, or yeah. In September when [they] came, landed in Inchon. Soon after that, this kind of thing happened.

And winter came. And one early morning about dawn, around 5:00 in the morning, when I was sleeping with my sister and mother, somebody was at the door. And, "omoni", North Korean dialect, which is mother, "omoni, omoni". And then my mom was - I could still remember, she was trembling. Oh, "Who is it? Who is it?" And then "Open the door. Open the door." And she went out. And then whole bunch of Chinese soldiers were there outside. And, "omoni, omoni", next door. And so go to the next door. And he [they] wanted to occupy our house.

So they [the soldiers] run away when the planes [come], there are planes. They just cover up themselves with white. So white sheets. Then it's hard for the pilots to see, on the snow, if they just lie down with a white sheet. They can be hidden like that. And then we went to our aunt's place next door. And after the breakfast, the first lieutenant of the Chinese soldiers came to visit us. And he said he was sorry that he took our home. And he has his wife and children in China. And he was able to talk in simple Korean. And he missed them. He was crying. And for a long time, his crying face was in my memory. I felt so sad for him. I felt so sorry. And we lost our cow. They just ate it all. They killed it, and they cooked. And of course, they didn't give us not a bit of it.

People were going to south, kept going. And then almost [all] the villages were empty. Everybody went to the south. But some people, like our family, remained. And people escaped especially because, oh, the Red - you know, Chinese Army, they killed people. Everybody. They killed everybody, and they split, you know. Like this, you know.[gestures] And all kinds of cruel things. And then people ran, escaped to south.

I don't know. Because that soldier was, you know, nice person. He was crying and missing his family members. And a few days they stayed there. And they left. They always moved at night, because of the planes. They risked to escape at night.

And about a week after that, our village was bombed by U.S. soldiers - the planes. Every day we were escaping to outskirts of our village, there was a cave, and we went into the cave. Oh, it was not a deep cave, but big enough for a family of ours to go in, crawl in and hide, for the bombing, actually. Because from time to time, the U.S. planes, they would bomb the places. So sometimes we went to the cave. And sometimes we didn't. And one day, planes - three or four, I think, came in. They began to bomb. And we could see from the cave, our house. And there was smoke coming up from our place. And my mom said, "Oh our house is burning." And when the planes were all gone, people were bloody faces, bloody arms, all those - you know, they were escaping, they were going outside of the village. And we went to our house. And then it was just a small thing [bombshell] was, you know, dropped there. And it just blew, yeah. And that was all. And we were really happy. Nothing else was blown. And thereafter, we moved to the next village. Where my father's friends lived. We stayed there, because we were so frightened. What if they, you know, bomb again. And then we stayed at father's friends about a week or so, and then came home.

And then it was about February or so, some of the U.N. soldiers came. They were going home. And then some British soldiers were there, too. And those days we had to hide again, we had to go out of the houses. Because at that time, some of the U.N. soldiers were rape, they were raping women. And so my sister, sister-in-laws and we, just every morning, after the breakfast, we would go to the cave to hide. Sometimes we would stay home. And some of the kids came to our house, and oh, "there comes the Americans." Or English, British, you know, soldiers. And then my sisters, big sister, sister-in-laws, they just ran into the house. Ran into the room, and there were wardrobes in the room. And they just - everybody went behind the wardrobes. And they were hiding there. And from here we could see all the feet [of the hiding girls]. And one day an English-British soldier came into our house. And then he just opened the door. He was looking around. He was looking at the feet. And he was laughing, and he just left. Then after they leave, my sisters, they just laugh, you know, coming out. One young mother, she was raped by a Korean Army [soldier]. Yeah. And she was crying, but she did not tell anything. But people knew that, yeah, she was raped.

### **Post-war Period**

I think peaceful time came soon after that, because we went to school—middle school—and things were okay. My favorite subject was English. And there was a U.S. chaplain who used to come to our school to teach English conversation to the operators. And I was envious. Oh what if he could teach, you know, the seventh graders? But we never had chance. But when recess

came, he would come out and talk with the girls. It was, of course, middle school and high school. And I spoke in English, and he was talking to me in English. He was asking me my name, and he gave my sister [an] English name, “Eunice,” because my sister's Korean name is Eun-sook. “Eunice is my big sister,” I said. And then my friends standing around me [said], “Oh, look, look at Insook! She is so brave. Oh, oh.” “Eunice is my big sister,” [I said]. And then he said, “Oh, is that right? And I like to give you English name, too.” So he gave me “Susan.” But most of the times, I use my Korean name here when I was working. In the beginning of my immigration time, I used the English name, but later years, I decided to use my Korean name....

After that, there was, you know, peaceful time. Everybody was working hard. We were going to school, try to learn new things. I was going to school. I was a middle-school girl, and our principal asked the whole school to go out to the demonstration. [At a] certain place, there was a big ground. That was before the armistice, you know—just before that was made. We were against it. So, with the placards people always had, boys from the boy's school and girls from our school, we were yelling, “We are against it. We are against the armistice.” Because you know, north and south will remain the same. We didn't like that. Our principal—I think from the governor or state [leader]—they must have sent notices to schools to have a demonstration in a big ground, you know, like a school playground, and in those days we had that kind of demonstration quite often. I don't remember what they were all about. [The placards read:] “We are against the armistice treaty.”

Emigration from Korea In those days, [Americans] who came to teach English conversation, sometimes they brought movies—cartoons mainly. And some of my friends, classmates, uncles or big brothers, they went to America and came home, bringing slides and slide viewers. And we could see the big buildings of the U.N. and New York City, and all those and people. We were lined up to take turn, waiting our turns to see the slides through the viewer. And during recess, they line up to see the slides. And also the movies the U.S. chaplain would bring to show us on Saturdays in the auditorium—cartoons and all the movies—good, you know, nice buildings, all those.

I walked for six years, about six kilometers, you know, from home to school—one way. And most of the times, we ran, you know, because otherwise, we are late. As soon as we have breakfast, my big sister and my niece—three of the girls in our village (no other people would send their children to high school)—we would run. Then we get very hungry. Then we eat lunch during recess time, after first period of school. And everything seems good in U.S. So in the morning, we run with my sister and niece. In the afternoon, I come home alone. I walk alone all by myself. I really hated that part—for six years. So what do I do? I had a dream that I'm going to the U.S., [that] I am going to Miguk [America]. All the way until I get home, I think about that. I'm going to America and study.

And I go “America” all the time—even, you know, when I was having a first date with my husband. He took me to a theater, and it was the movie, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. I didn't know I could understand, but I was not paying attention to the movie. I was thinking all the time, “Right after this, I have to tell this guy that I have a dream to go to America.” If he doesn't like me, that's fine. If he thinks, “I don't like girls who want to go to America,” I don't want to have a

date. If he says, "That's it," [still] I must tell him. I must let him know. And so, after the movie, we came outside. I said, "My dream is going to America." And he did not say anything. And we got married and we had children, and then many, many years later, in America, I said, "That time I told you that, and you didn't respond at all. Why?" He said, "I didn't hear that. I didn't hear you say that."

It was my dream to come to America. Things seemed so good, you know, by the slides and the movie and all of those. Oh, and once, you know, I was working. I was a secretary to an American missionary, a woman. And I said, "My dream is to go to America." She said, "Why?" "I like to go to America," [I said]. She said, "Oh, I wonder why." I said, "I want to go there." "Oh, no, Miguk is not that good everywhere. No, it's different from what you are thinking," [she said]. "But I still want to go to Miguk," I said.

I saw—by the time I became a mother of two kids, and I got more matured—well, human society where people live is about the same. That's what I felt. Nowadays still I feel the same way. All the cities in the world, they seem so alike, so much alike. But I enjoyed living in America. Still I am enjoying living in America. After marriage, after having two kids, [my husband] came first as a student, and then invited me.

### **War Legacies**

About the war? I just thought, you know, why the British soldier came, and why the American soldiers came. I had been wondering about that so many times. Of course, in school, they would teach [that the] British soldiers came to our country to fight the communists. Yeah, yeah, of course, you know, logically, that's understandable, but oh, it is strange. It's strange, I thought. Of course, we learned that the U.N. soldiers, they are helping us—helping South Korea to win, fighting against the communists. We learned, of course—later days, we learned again, again, and again in school, they came to help us, to fight for us. Sometimes we were asked to write thank-you letters to the U.N. soldiers and [South] Korean army in school.

You know, but later years, what I can do? What can we do? I think the war is bad. I felt so all the time, especially for the young people, young children. I didn't realize that strongly about the communist.... Chinese communists coming to our village gave me such a terrible, horrible, you know, fear deep inside. Even in Korea, I have sometimes terrible, horrible dreams about the communists. Oh, the communists coming to our village—like that. But in [at] that time, I didn't think I had that much, you know, fear, scary feeling, deep inside to a young child. It did hurt so much, you know, and emotional disturbance, because when I work hard.... That time when he [my husband] was going to the Claremont School of Theology, I was working in the school library. And sometimes I had to type. And typing is not my aptitude. I hate to type. And whenever I have a lot of typing, then I would [have] such a horrible dream about the communists. And in my dream, a thick metal, you know, airplane would fly middle of the mountain, behind our village. Then in my dream, I said, "No, the communists again." And then, the feeling is really terrible. And then when I awake, perspiration. Nowadays, I don't have such dream, you know. But even a few years in America, I had that kind of dream. It [war] hurts the little kids not only physically, but also psychologically in their lives. It's bad. War is bad. Yeah, war is bad. I don't know—how should I say—politics is, you know, sometimes headache. The

politicians—they are stubborn, you know. That's what I think—stubborn because they cannot forgive. Forgiveness is far away. Of course, I have a big hope that someday, that time [for reunification] would come. Sometimes it seems close, but sometimes it seems very far—Korean unification... Anyway, war is bad. War is very bad. So I hope Korea's reunification would come without war. There should come peace for reunification. I pray. I hope it will come that way. I want to pray, you know, for Korea's reunification—peaceful reunification, please....