



## LEGACIES OF THE KOREAN WAR

Oral History Project

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Interview with:  
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### **Korean War Memories**

So my town was called, Chun-ho dong, which now belongs to the city of Seoul, and is across from Walker Hill Hotel over Han River. I was in middle school at the time and this is what it was like when the war broke out. It was summer at the time so my family sent me out on an errand. I was told to pick cucumbers from the field. So I went across a relatively tall mountain to reach the field. From there, you can see a bridge over the Han River. At that time, we called that bridge the Kwang-na-ru Bridge. I was about to pick the cucumbers when I heard a sound that I heard for the first time, ever. We didn't know anything about the war. During the Japanese colonial period, I was only in second grade of elementary school. And it was then that Korea was liberated from Japanese rule. And I did not hear any sound of bombs during liberation. Yet on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950, while I was picking cucumbers, the war had broke out and led to the collapse of the Kwang-na-ru Bridge. I remember being so shocked and petrified by the sound of it, that I threw down all the cucumbers and ran straight into my house. The collapse of the Kwang-na-ru Bridge was the result of the war breaking out on June 25<sup>th</sup>.

So after the collapse of the bridge, I went to school... Yeah the day after. I just wanted to check with school about the current situation. I was able to see people fleeing from Seoul on the second floor of my school. I saw a family load their bags and also their children on a cart. I saw a woman carry a bag and her child on her back. That was my first time to witness the notion of "fleeing" in person and I realized that is how fleeing looks like. My school told students not to come back to school until the war ended, so I remember I just walked back home that day, watching people flee from Seoul. We couldn't flee at first, so I got to encounter North Korean people a little later. One time I remember that a North Korean person was harvesting a stem of rice and was counting each grain of the rice, so I asked what he was doing. He told me that he was counting to calculate the average of the paddy rice production so that he would know how much he was supposed to pay to the country. Yeah, I remember what he told me clearly. And also every night I remember that the North Koreans who captured Seoul gathered young people together and taught them songs praising Kim Il Sung Kim ...

So during the war, since the war broke out in summer and our family was good with money at that time, we just stayed at our house, not fleeing. And it was so sudden invasion, so we just stayed at our place, but since he [my brother] was older than 20 years old, he had to hide in the shelter and to sleep in the mountain in order not to be drafted by the North Korean People's army. Yet, eventually he had to flee to Busan. As we heard at that time after General MacArthur recaptured Seoul, we who lived in Seoul at that time, were liberated from the control of the North Korean People's army. Many people who went to flee came back to Seoul again and I got to meet with my brother because of that.

Then winter came. During that winter, the South Korean soldiers went up to Amnok River, but they had to retreat due to Chinese soldiers coming down towards the south. That is what is called 'The Fourth of January Retreat'. When that happened, just like the refugees who dragged their carts with their stuff around, we had to use 4 or 5 carts to load all of our things, especially since we had a bigger house. We went out together, grabbing onto a straw rope. We did this so as not to be separated from each other, grabbing tight onto the rope, since there were so many refugees. As refugees, we had to walk day and night. So, all of the children my age, 14 years old, became exhausted.

One night, I think it was around 11 at night when we were walking past Suwon to head south, I was nodding off while holding the rope walking, when I felt the need to urinate. But there were so many people around me. I wanted to find a place to urinate where people could not see me. So I let go of the rope that I was holding and left to urinate. However, because I was feeling so drowsy, I lost my sense of direction and I alone went the opposite direction of my family, who went south. There were so many people around, some of them heading north and some of them heading south. I was trying to regain my sense of direction and run back to where my family was, but I could not find them. So from then on I had to be on my own.

When my family left to Busan from home, my father gave a small amount of money to each family member, saying if one of us got lost, this money would help you survive. So I had some money thanks to my father, but it was quite useless since we were in the middle of war. I started to go down to the south by myself. On the way down, if I couldn't find a place to stay, I begged people to let me stay with them for the night. Gratefully some of them actually allowed me to stay at their place.

One time when I was passing Okcheon, Chungcheongbuk-do, I couldn't find a place to stay. I went into one of the houses there and begged to stay for the night. The guy, who looked like a grandfather, came out and graciously let me stay his place for the night. You know at his place there was one more room right above the bottom room, so he replenished a fire to heat up the rooms, the upper room was usually way more cold than the bottom room. So the guy kindly tucked me in with his blanket. I also heard a lot of rats running around above the ceiling.

There was an interesting incident. I was asleep and I realized that something small just dropped from the ceiling. I pick up the thing, and it looked like a soft small lump that smelled good. I couldn't help it but just put it in my mouth since I was very starved. I started to chew and it tasted so good. I'd not tasted something better than that before and I was so surprised. I kept wondering about what that lump was. It was way better than sesame salt. After the guy left for work, I checked what that lump was and it was from a block of fermented soybeans. You know what it is yeah? It is made of soybeans and has a rectangular shape. There were around 10 blocks of it hanging from the ceiling. That was why the rats were running around above the ceiling to eat the fermented soybeans. I went to find the leftovers that fell from the block while the rats were trying to eat it from the ceiling. Now I think about it...haha. I was actually trying to steal a block of it from the house. The texture of it was quite soft inside and hard outside, so I put my finger in the block and broke it into pieces and put those in my pocket. It is funny to think about that again.

After I went down to Okcheon, I figured I would not be able to live like this by myself anymore, so I decided to come home [to Seoul]. Since I knew where the rice was and where the kimchi was buried from the winter time, I thought at least I could eat. So I told myself, "I am going home whether I die or live." Yet, I realized soon that I could only reach up to the point that the American soldiers had advanced. Because, beyond that point, it was still a battlefield. Yet, around 20 days later, the American soldiers recaptured almost up until where my house was, but couldn't get beyond that for a while. I couldn't wait anymore, so I worked up the courage to sneak through the battlefield to reach my house. But when I arrived, the North Korean People's

Army was still there, in our neighborhood. The Chinese soldiers were there walking around, as well.

So then I snuck into my house. I stayed in the shelter that my father built in my house since everyday there was bombings by planes. One day, a Chinese soldier came to my house and put a gun to my head, ordering me to come out. I couldn't understand much since he spoke in Chinese. As I was walking out with my hands up, he seemed to be asking if I was with anyone. So I told him I was alone and there was nobody else. He looked at my face again and patted my back. He was a really good person, all those Chinese people were. I was so scared, I was sobbing in front of him. Then he told me not to worry and stay inside to avoid the airplane bombings. He used gestures to tell me this and I went inside. On that night, the U.S. planes were bombing the area all night long. As a result, the North Korean soldiers and the Chinese soldiers ran away across the Han River, towards the north. Then, the American soldiers arrived and recaptured the area. Afterwards, the rest of my family came back and I reunified with them. This is my experience during the war.