



LEGACIES OF THE KOREAN WAR

Oral History Project

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Interview with:

Reverend Ann Rhee Menzie

First Generation

Born 1946, Seoul, South Korea

Interviewed by:

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My name is Ann and I am an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church. And I work fighting against domestic violence and advocate for domestic violence survivors. I also try to organize church people to work against domestic violence. That's my call.

Japanese Colonial Period

My family background. My mother was born in North Korea and my father was born in North Korea. They were studying abroad, sort of; my mother was studying in Seoul and my father studied in Japan, all before 1945. And then they got married and settled in Seoul. So I was born in Seoul. But all my extended families are supposed to be in North Korea. My mother and father are from Hamgyong namdo. Hamhung area, yes. And [of] my father's family, I think only my father and his sister came down to South and my mother's-actually, we had more of my mother's side [of the] family [in South Korea]; her mother and father and her two brothers. So now I have cousins still in South Korea...

My grandmother's mother lost her husband. So, [my grandmother] lost her father. And in late 1800's, women, when they have no husband, they had no means. And apparently they weren't from a very rich, yangban [ruling class] family because in yangban family, you lose your husband, you become a widow all your life. But in poorer families, they couldn't do that. So she had to find another husband; like the people in the Bible, they had to find another husband to keep living. So she found another husband and had children. And so she [my grandmother] became like a big sister who was taking care of little siblings. At about nine, ten years old, she decided that she didn't like that. So she was then apparently introduced to church, so she was going to church, Sunday school, and she talked to the missionaries and the missionaries apparently told her that if she came to their house and lived with them and help out with the house chores, they'll send her to school. So she [grandmother] packed her measly bag and went to missionary home and lived there and went to school. She graduated high school all the way through.

And my [maternal] grandfather was actually born in Hamyangdo somewhere, Hamyangdo west. His mother also kept having children, but kept losing babies. He [my grandfather] was the last one that was left and then she [his mother] lost her husband. And so she went to a fortuneteller woman or something, "What am I going to do now?" Apparently that fortune teller-this is family myth or I don't know how much is real and how much is what-but it is said that the fortuneteller told her that the baby was seized by Jesus' spirit. So only thing she could do to save him was take him to Jesus. So the story goes that she was looking for some church or the missionary people and whatnot and drifted into Hamyangdo. And I don't know, maybe somebody who knew that area or whatever, but Hamhung, they had many missionaries like Methodists and Presbyterians and they had missionary schools and churches. So she went there and raised the child there and the child started going to Sunday school and church and whatever and the missionaries apparently took him. I'm wondering if she worked for a missionary home there somewhere too. So he also went to all the schools there. And so the missionary parents got together and introduced them [grandfather and grandmother] together and that's how they got married. [laughs]

So it's like that's where our ancestry sort of begins. It's like we don't know anything beyond that. [All] I know, so like the Jesus spirit seizing my grandfather [as a] baby. That's what happened. So those two were always very, very devout Christians and my grandfather did nothing but write his sermons and preach and you know, visit. And a lot of visiting, pastoral care things I think my grandmother did. She was always busy going somewhere. Because of her, I used to be late to the school too because she'd forget to come home.

So my mother is from a Christian family.... My maternal grandfather was a Presbyterian minister in North Korea. He graduated from Pyongyang Seminary, I think [it was a] seminary in Pyongyang. And then he was a minister in Hamhung area. Also [he was] chaplain at a high school in Hamhung. And then he came down [south]. So [my mother] she's from Christian family and she went to Christian high school. She was very, I think they used to say, "a fashionable young woman." And then she went to Ewha University to study.

And my father is from-I've never met his family except the one aunt that moved down. But his father was a jeweler in Hamhung. And I think my father had several brothers, but I don't remember how many. My father was the oldest and he went to Japan to study. I think my mother said that he went to Tokyo University or something. But it's like my father's sister, younger sister, were high school friends with my mother. And that's how they met.

In 1940, you know, mid '40s, I think about 1944, the Second World War was really going into-I think Japan was losing and losing. So more people were being drafted and more young ladies were taken to be the comfort women. I think that was a big scare. So Ewha University was graduating young women, their students, early before they finished the school. They were just giving the diplomas out and telling them to get married because Ewha students were not supposed to be married. They were all single, 'maidens' or whatever. And when I was going to Ewha [much later], if you get married, you're automatically [forced] out of school. You had to be single woman. So they were graduating, finishing the schools early on so they [the women students] could get married because then they wouldn't be drafted to [become] comfort women.

Liberation and Pre War Period

So mother married in 19—really funny—they got married and then war ended! [1945] Kind of weird. They got married and war ended. So mother was really crying a lot and you can see her picture. We only have one picture and she says, "Ah, this is a horrible picture of me." And I said, "Why?" She said because "I cried all day. My eyes are puffy." And I said, "Okay?"

Interviewer: Did she not want to get married?

Apparently not because she was only like twenty-two, something like that. And she didn't graduate. I mean, in her mind, she didn't graduate because they were just sending them out. [with diplomas ahead of time] I think she got married in the summer of 1945 and then I was born in 1946, June. And then 1950 happened. So, my mother had that sort of four years of life. Four, five, '45 to '50. Five years of married life. That was it. She became a widow in 1950; she was twenty-six. She got married at twenty-one.

They made a home in Noriyangjin and I think my father had a small paper mill company that was reproducing the used papers, recycled papers kind of thing. My mother told me it was a mill kind of thing. And my father's mother was very "shik-shik-han Harmoni" [brave grandmother], like a very brave woman. And she would come across [the] 38th Parallel to visit her son and the family, and she would go back. So she apparently saw me, I'm sure. But I don't remember. And grandfather never was able to come down and visit. And my mom and dad never ventured to go through the [38th] parallel line. I think they were-I was told that many people were doing that. It wasn't that strict as [the] current DMZ. So people were able to bring food or you know, botari [things packed in a pack or bundle] and they would come down.

And so that's how the relationship was. I don't think South-I don't know. Maybe South Koreans, some of them went up and came back. But what I was told when I was growing up was that some person [guards] was not that strict. People were able to sneak through. But once DMZ [after the Korean War] happened, no. Nobody was able to go up and down....

At the end of World War II, you know, the U.S. and Russia, those powerful countries, sat down. 'Okay, Russia will have control over'-oh, no- they didn't say that. Russia will assist North Korean government to settle and the U.S. took a role to support South Korean government. And where was it [the meeting of the governments]? Some meeting, some military guy drew a line in the middle that became the 38th Parallel and we got divided. So like between 38th Parallel and DMZ line, the DMZ is more of this kind of line. [draws a line in the air] I don't know how that got drawn that way, but anyway...one day they were North Korea. One day they were South Korea. The next day, they were North Koreans. So, okay, but it was totally not of their own will, right? It was all the war leaders [who] had drawn the lines and the people like my family, powerless.

Like my family, you know, after the Second World War, Korea became, I think, very happy country because they were freed from Japanese governing, you know. So, they were free but they weren't really ready to have an independent government. They weren't trained, you know. Suddenly from kingdom and then [occupation]. And then one day they have to be a people-led government. And I think it was a chaotic time and that's when these powerful countries took over to fill their needs. So people were very confused, I think.

My father, I think my father must have been confused too. My mother, I can't imagine how she felt. But my father, I don't know. Nobody was able to tell me whether my father graduated or whatever, because he must have hurried to come home to get married too, right? Because that's what I was told, that he came to Seoul, got married. And he studied the law in Japan. Now, I don't know what a Korean [laughs] [would] have learned in Japanese university in Japan in that political turmoil time. And obviously, he wasn't compelled to practice any law because he started the business. He didn't. But he must have had some ideas about what's going on as a young man. So, my understanding is during that time, he was supporting, like participating in groups and support[ing] some idealistic, socialistic groups, I think. I was never told that when I was growing up. I was told about that after I immigrated to U.S., many, many, many years later. My mother told me that.

Korean War Memories

So June 25th, 1950 was just five days before my birthday, before my fourth birthday. I do not remember anything. All I remember is [that] I ended up in Kwangju, in a small town in Kwangju. That's my earliest memory of my life actually. I don't have any memories [of going] from Seoul to Busan, Busan to Kwangju. I don't have any memories. And my theory on that is that I suppressed it. It was hard. I was told many stories about how hard it is. We walked. Can you imagine [a] four year old walking in the snow? And that's what we did. I was told we walked to Suwon from Seoul and then somehow my mother, with her broken English, she was able to get on the freight train that a U.S. soldier allowed her to get on. So my mom and my grandmother and me and my little brother and an infant and a cousin who happened to be visiting us; so six of us rode the freight train to Busan.

Anyway, I don't remember anything, really. My earliest memory is of a childhood in Kwangju, going to school. So, my mother was [a] single mother and she was making [a] living. She had to go back to nursing school to study and became a nurse and all that. So in the meantime, her mother spent a lot of time with us....

And she would talk about how hard it was or she would wonder if my father's still alive. She would always refer to her dream, saying, "Oh, your father is still alive. He said this and said that," until one day in my high school days, she said "Your father's now dead." I said, "How do you know that?" [She said,] "Yes, oh, he showed up in my dream but he's not saying anything and he just went." So, what happened to my father is really [in] the stories that I heard later in my life. While we were growing up, my mother never talked about my father. And the only person who talked about my father was my mother's mother.

My father was involved in some group, a group of people who was, I believe, to be more socialistic, idealists [kind of] group. And when June 25th the North Koreans came down, took over a bank in Seoul, one of the major banks in Seoul, and apparently they were connected with this group that my father was a part of. So my father was put in to manage the bank by North Koreans. So he apparently did that and then in September, when the North Koreans were retreating back to North, my father got scared because he couldn't stay in Seoul and face the South Korean military. So he packed his backpack and told my mother, "I'll be back." And he left. My mother, I think to this day is not happy about that. [laughs] Just she couldn't, she was never political. She never expressed anything about society or politics, nothing. I suppose she was always busy making a living, but she never really talked about how hard it was, why the war [happened], never blamed anything or anybody. She was just always just working. So I don't know how political or [where] her mind was; but father leaving like that, she was personally holding him [responsible] for like 'he abandoned me' kind of feeling.

And he never came back. And it was really sad for her, really. She was only twenty-five and a half in June. June-her birthday is in October-so she was not quite twenty-six and she had two toddlers. And she was sick. She had back pain and her doctor told her she had tuberculosis in her spine or something, so she had to be put on bed rest. That's why my grandmother was there to help her. And also, one of my cousins came down from Hamhung to visit and that was our family at the time.

Refugee Life

And so my mother was in bed, sort of bed-ridden when my father left with a backpack. And she thought that's what she had, sick with two toddlers and a husband gone and the war happening. And I think [a] few months went by, her belly started growing. Then, she knew she was pregnant. Apparently she did not have menstruation after the second child. So she didn't know when she got pregnant. So then, I think she started moving around, and then when January came and everybody was [gone]-really [the] last group of people were fleeing town-that's when she started fleeing or moving away or escaping.

She was escaping, finally. And then that started her-how do I say, I can't remember the word. She broke [her] water and she had to have a baby in January in the middle of that. So grandma and the kids, we all had to move back into the house and have the baby. And I believe that baby was premature, you know. So my grandmother and my mother, they thought the child was dead, like stillborn because the child was not crying, was little and blue; but my grandmother and my mother didn't have the heart to consider it dead because he wasn't 'dead' yet, either. So, you know what they did? They ripped apart the Korean ibul, the comforter, and took out the cotton because they weren't ready for a baby. They didn't have anything for baby clothes or whatever. I'm sure they had some toddler's clothes. But they pulled out the cotton and packed the bucket, the water pail, and put the baby there and wrapped it with cotton. Then they started walking [south, to escape] again. So my cousin, who was about nine years old at the time, had to carry the bucket with a baby in it because my mother had to carry [the] two year old toddler who could not walk. So she had to carry the baby. And I had to walk. I was four years old, you know. So I had to walk. So that's how we started that refugee journey. And a few days later apparently, I don't know how long it took, but the baby started crying and grandmother felt, you know, felt, "Oh my gosh." So, they then washed him and I suppose put the clothes that my other brother had, whatever, you know. Yeah, so my cousin was forever proud that he carried that baby. His name carries his name too, you know, his cousin's name.

That's how we went down. My mother had to backtrack what day she had the child. So up to this day, I think we just assumed that day was his birthday, but she didn't have calendar, they didn't have any idea of what day it was because they were isolated since father left. And they were scared. I can't imagine how they must have felt when the South Korean army was moving in and they were in the middle of the war. They must have been very scared because somebody found out that he [father] had served in-I'm sure somebody had found out, you know, that he had served and worked as a bank manager for three months or whatever, two months[for the North Koreans]. So they must have been very scared....

I used to kind of have a dream, it was an orange sky. Orange sky and just kind of-I couldn't explain what it was. It was just orange. And that was that. So later when my grandmother was talking about [the] war and the refugee journey kind of thing, I asked her one day, I said, "I have this dream. Like it's not a long dream, but a moving red sky. What is that?" She says, "Oh, we left Seoul and we were walking a little bit and then there was a bombing, you know. Bombing that was happening, and we all had to scam into some household. But the sky was red. You probably remember that." I said, "Oh, okay." Well, that explains, you know, because it was really sky was orange red and moving, sort of.

My other memory of the war that I got confirmed later was that I was crawling into a hole-like space in the kitchen I thought. And I thought 'in the kitchen?' That doesn't make any sense. So, you know, I thought maybe I was imagining things, so I asked my grandmother, "What was that? I remember vividly that I was crawling into a hole in the kitchen." And grandmother said, "Oh yeah, we did that." I said, "What did you do?" So in Korean kitchens, in country houses, the kitchen was built on the dirt floor, right, and then the adobe, they built sort of fireplaces and then, on top of it, you put big pots. But the fireplace is about yea big, like the modern outdoor oven size, about this. [gestures] And that's where they [the family] were hiding us. They were putting children in there because it was empty, right in there. And in a sense, I guess, that was a bomb shelter. So those two are my personal memories. Others are all told by my grandmother. It's like grandmother tells me because we started going down in January, walking in January in Seoul area. Like she told me how painful it was to walk and watch mounds in the rice fields, mounds like tombs. Like, "What is it?" And she says that some people left children. They couldn't walk any more or they couldn't carry them anymore and hoping that somebody else would find them or whatever, but they would leave them [covered] with those Korean comforters, ibul. Like grandmother said that she saw some of those and-very painful. It's crazy....

My mother, who studied English literature in Ewha [university], was able to speak with some U.S. soldier. She told me later that she was able to explain-I don't know how she explained-but I'm sure the guy [was] looking at the mother and the infant and the children, you know, [and] that he felt compassionate to put them in a freight car and told my mother to be absolutely quiet. So, they did. Stayed absolutely quiet. Or I don't know how absolutely quiet [a] two year old and an infant can, "I wish I had taken his name." And if by then, she never thought of coming to [the] U.S. I'm sure [that she would have contacted the soldier in the U.S.] So, it was just the thing. You didn't ask for names or whatever. And I asked her, "So what was he like?" And she said he was a Black soldier. And I said, "And you didn't tell me this before, you know?" "Um, no." Whatever. You know, when I was a child, when I was told that story, I imagined a white soldier because all Americans were supposed to be white, you know. And I said, "Oh, wow", you know. So, a Black soldier saved my mother I don't know how many miles of walking, yeah. Whoever he is....

My father's sister, the one that came down during the war, I think they, how do I say, they escaped Hungnam. Like recently, there is a movie, Gukje Shijang, 'The International Market' [English title: Ode to My Father], that movie, the Korean movie. There's a scene of people from Hungnam fleeing. So my aunt fled with her husband and her, I don't know, a child or I think she came with a child. She later had more. I think it was in September when they were coming down. So that she was already in Busan. She was already in Busan and it's amazing. Without cell phones and telephones and whatever, I don't know how they found each other, but my mother found her.

And so we were there together for a bit. My aunt was at that international market selling things. I think I understood that international market to be a place where you can sell anything, you can find anything, you can buy anything. Everybody's selling [things] from silver spoons to their old jacket or underwear or whatever, you know. That's what my aunt was doing, just selling whatever she could get a hold of. So mother was there for, we were there for, I think, a few

months. I'm not even sure how long. Soon we moved to Kwangju because my mother's brother was living in Kwangju at the time as a medical doctor. So, she came [to Kwangju] and we lived off-we got great support from him for a while, yeah.

Interviewer: Did you spend the rest of the war period in Kwangju?

Yeah, yeah. We moved back to Seoul in 1959. 1959 we moved back to Seoul. So my childhood was in Kwangju.

When we were children, we were told that my father was missing, went missing during the war. And then, during that time, a lot of kids would have father dead during the war, father missing during the war, father survived the war. Three categories. That was it. I didn't even understand the 'North Koreans, South Koreans', you know, how could [I].

Later, when I was older, I learned that some people didn't even suffer much during the war. They just lived in their house during the war. Some people came and went, came and went, but they were able to live in their household. I couldn't believe that. I thought everybody went through like we did in the war, you know, like you pack and you move and you have nothing. How much can you carry with baby on the back and, you know, that's what we lived on, you know. So, it was crazy....

And so what I remember is, my first memory is in Kwangju. The first day I go to school. I remember that day. My big cousin, my oldest cousin, was coming to get me to take me to school because my mother wasn't available, you know. The first day in the school, I suppose. I didn't know, but I suppose all the parents were taking their kids, but I didn't have parents available. So, my big cousin was coming over to take me to the school. And he showed up in this college uniform. Then, college students were wearing uniforms too. So he had [on his] college uniform and the square hat and he showed up. I was so proud. So he took me to school and we got new books and he wrote all my name there in the books. And so that was my actually first memory of Kwangju, you know. And I think I was seven. Six or seven.

And you know how cruel it was, though? Because I went to elementary school in Kwangju, which is southwest, and it was not as big a city [as it is] now. It was smaller. And every spring, like April 1st is our first day of the school year, and the new teachers come in, and you know what I still remember is that they would ask-and I still remember -it was very hurtful. The teacher would ask, "Raise your hand if you don't have a father." Like the class was about sixty kids sitting and I'd raise my hand and there would be some others, right? "And raise your hand if you have a radio in the household." Like what? But I couldn't raise my hand because we never had anything, you know. "Raise your hand if you read newspaper." "Raise your hand", you know, all these personal things and it was just so inconsiderate and all I remember is how shameful, shamed I was feeling, you know. I felt like, "My gosh, I don't have anything. I don't have father. I don't have anything," you know. It's just always very, how would I say, humiliating, you know. And that was my childhood. It was just not happy. And what I was told about my father was he went missing during the war. And that's all I could repeat. He went missing. And all I could imagine was that it was chaotic and maybe he went out one day and just went missing. But the truth was that he wasn't [just missing]....

Postwar Period

During 1950's and early 60's, when I was growing up, that it was common understanding that if your father or your brother or somebody willingly went up to North, that your family is sort of red-flagged or branded as reds or whatever. And you're the family who [the society] should watch out for and what activities you might be doing, suspicious activities you might be doing. Or, if you want to go out of the country, then [they would ask], "Why?" And I think it was a Korean word, I think yo chu-eui inmul [a person to keep an eye on, someone dangerous], which means that 'it is necessary to watch these people' kind of category. So I think that's why my mother never really told me or told any of kids. I mean, my older cousins may have understood. I have a cousin who's currently eighty years old, and I'm sure he understood, but it was the family unspoken rule that you don't tell children about those things. So, no, we didn't know. But, the community was really not supporting the people who had in a sense lost [family], you know. We lost our father. He went up [North] but we lost. But we and my mother and families like us were the people who had to be 'watched out for', for whatever activities that they might be doing, I don't know. Subversive. [Laughs]

Interviewer: Why did the teachers ask you to raise your hand if you don't have a father?

Oh, I would love to ask that question to those teachers, you know. I would like to think that they were just lazy teachers or maybe they didn't know how to respect private matters. Or they didn't know children had feelings or-I don't know. It's really harsh. It was really harsh time. I think that's why people were insensitive. No, it was crazy time.

Oh my gosh, personally, you know, there was no male role model in my household. I and my brothers had to kind of figure out our own life without that. My father not being there, my mother was not a full mother either, right? She had to make [a]living. She had to be outside all the time and so we didn't have a mother's role model either. So, it's a miracle that three of us are still alive and well and reasonably happy and have partners, you know. I wonder about my brothers, how they made marriages, like how they know how to be a father and a husband. But they are doing it, and I think it's a miracle. But that was the biggest thing that I felt all my life, that, you know, of course my first marriage was not working because I didn't know how to work that out. So that's one biggest effect. Not having a father in the household, and you know, we were still living in that traditional world. Then, we were all like mother, father, and grandparents and during the summer vacation, you go to your grandparents' home and you get treated so well and then you come back. And then in the fall, when we begin the second semester, you know, teachers make you talk about what was your summer, you know? "Share your experience at your grandparents." And you know, "We went out here and we went out picnic," this and I'm going like, "I don't have that. " I didn't have any place to go. You know, none of our uncles, you know, two uncles, and my mother, we didn't have roots in the South, right? So, there was not a single property we could call home. So summer came and winter vacation came and we couldn't go anywhere and enjoy that. And I thought that was always a very cruel thing to do too in the fall, [laughs] you know. You make these kids talk about those wonderful experiences and I'm going like "I had to be home trying to feed my brothers" or, you know, "Figure out how to survive a day." So, that was not good. It was harsh to children....

But all my life, and then when I graduated college and was getting ready to emigrate here to the US, my mother was telling me little bits of different things, like because your father went missing, that we weren't able to go out of country, or be able to request certain services. And I couldn't understand, "What does that mean? Why? Why couldn't you?" But she wasn't telling me the full story. And apparently, if your family member went up to North, that your family was red-flagged and you couldn't really excel in that [South Korean] society. No support. Yeah, I think at the time after the war, Korean War, and all these North and South...okay, literally we're still in war, right? We're still at war.

Armistice (July 27, 1953)

[Armistice] was non-event, I think, you know, I was a child. No, in my household, it was [a]non-event. The signing of armistice, we didn't even know the war ended. And to me, I think as a child, because adults were not making big deal out of it, I had no idea, you know. I think even looking back when I was playing with other children, whatnot, I was aware that we didn't have father because of the war and we were poor because we didn't have father. But I wasn't really aware that the war was really happening. I think it was just the effect that we were put into, and not really that we had any understanding of the war and armistice or North or South or Russia or America. I didn't know anything. My mother never talked about it, and you know, we were very small family, and I think the uncles were much older than my mother, so they didn't talk to kids. And we never were given any explanations or whatever. It just, it's crazy. I learned a lot more after I immigrated to U.S. because I, on my own, read and here and, you know, studied and whatever. So, I heard more and understood a little more, but as a child, no. All of us, like I was [a] very resentful child, considerate-considerate is not the word. Very kind of quiet and not much a talker. I was not a talker. I was quiet and the teachers always described me as a responsible, quiet kid. So, like I would never miss class. I would never miss homework or whatever. But I wasn't out there. So I think that's when I grew all my pessimistic view [laughs] on people and things.

Postwar Period

It's much different now, but yeah. I was, yeah, a sort of a brooding kid. High school picture, you know, I was looking at my high school pictures, the tiny pictures. There's not many of me really smiling big or laughing. This was not very happy situations, I think. It was just always missing something, always missing something. I missed the non-existence of father. [It] was something that left a big hole. And then, non-existent mother [because she was always working]. And always non-existence of resources, you know. It's just, we didn't, we never had enough things around. Often, not enough food around. So it was always something to worry about. And so, as a child and a girl, you know, a teenage girl, it was very unhappy situations and I had no one to get angry at. So, it was a brooding kid I think....

You know, when I was a girl, yeah like even in high school, every winter, if the winter comes, my nose would become blue. My cheeks would become blue, like you're frozen. Just very cold. And I didn't like my face being purple. Like oh, I didn't like it. And my grandmother says it's because you were frozen when you were a little kid. "Every day you cried. Every day we walked, you cried and your tears would come down and your cheek will, you know, literally freeze it's so cold. And so, that's what it is, girl." I'm going like 'No wonder I hate it', you know.

So, how hard it was. Imagine. You take [a] four year old girl out now, here in California, and let her walk half a mile. See if she's happy. And in the middle of the winter? The Korean winter then was colder than nowadays. I think the cement that we cover the earth, it makes it warm. The spring flowers bloom earlier, much earlier now. Then, it was so cold. Earth would freeze during the winter and just so cold. So my mother tells me of course North Korea was colder. [laughs] So walking and basically being hungry and I can't imagine anything happy there. And then I had to always be the big sister. So, I had nothing to really cherish during that time, you know.

After the war, my mother went back to school. So my uncle, her brother, was a medical doctor then. And he was teaching at a university there, medical school. So he enrolled her into nursing school. So she went to nursing school for three years and she became a nurse. And so then later she also got a license for being a midwife. So I remember riding on a bicycle, on the back seat of a bicycle with my mother going to deliver a baby at some house in Kwangju. So she was doing that and she was also working as a nurse at a hospital. Now when we moved back to Seoul, she was a school nurse. She was a school nurse at Ewha, actually. So she was always working but it was never enough [support] for three kids.

And so I remember in my childhood and until I left Korea, my mother and we must have moved like almost every year. We would move from one room apartment to one room, you know, one room in a house or two rooms in a house or whatever. We never owned a house, you know. So we always had to rent a room here and there depending on who's doing what. And I think [it] depended on my mother's money. If she didn't have enough money, she had to move to a cheaper place or whatever, you know. So we were always moving. Oh my goodness. She dealt with the hard, hard living.

Emigration From Korea

1971, I came to California from Korea. It was right after I graduated Ewha. I decided [laughs], I decided to immigrate to the U.S. because I got married to a man who was living in California; Korean, and he came to Korea in my last year in the college and somehow we hit it off and decided that we'll marry, you know. Or he asked me to marry and I said yes and if there was ever a crazy reason for a marriage.... I had no reason. I had no reason to marry him. But I think in my subconscious I was ready to escape from all that [in Korea]; not having anything, escaping or wanting to start a new life. Or you know, because my mother was always struggling to put food on the table and I always felt like I had to, as the oldest child, I had to help my mother. You know, after I graduated high school, I didn't go to college straight. I think in my high school, I and my friend were only two who didn't go to college. [laughs] At that time, yeah, it was crazy. I decided that my mother needed my help to put food on the table, to make money. So I'm graduating this very good high school. I should be able to find a job. So I graduated. I said no, I'm not going to go to college because it's all not relevant to me. So I started looking for a job and I could not find a job. High school graduate. The only thing I could get was in some small office as an assistant who's basically cleaning the floor or making coffee and that kind of thing and that was not my idea of a job. So, then my grandfather found me a job at a radio assembly company, a factory. So I went there and worked about six months assembling transistor radios. And there, I was always getting into trouble, like arguing with supervisors. [laughs] Supervisors

were fresh out of college kids and I'm fresh out of high school, but I'm very proud. I might be timid, but by then I was very strong. I was always strong. So I would argue with those guys and I was not happy. And I was finding nothing was really fair in my mind.

It wasn't fair this, it wasn't fair that. So I was always arguing. And then, a friend at the church finally said, "No, you can't do that. Just why don't you go to college and figure [it] out." So, two years later, I went to the college. By then, my classmates were halfway through and [laughs] I was this older kid, you know, older woman, oh my gosh, in my class. So by the time I graduated, like half of my high school friends were married already and in those days, it was like the good girls would graduate college and shijip ga [get married and traditionally, go to the groom's house] like get married and without any thinking. I think a lot of them just married because it was, that's what you do, huh. So, when this guy asked me to marry him, okay I looked at myself. I said, "Okay, I don't have a 'good' family name. I don't have a prestigious whatever [family] backing me up. I don't have money. I'm not very good looking." And you know, listen, I don't have much to offer and this guy wants to marry? I said, "Okay." [laughs] That's crazy. But yeah, later I learned-thank God-that wasn't the reason to marry and that wasn't the reason to keep on staying married. So, yeah. It was crazy time, though.

Interviewer: But that got you to California.

Yeah. [laughs] Yes, that got me to California and my current husband says, when I talk about this, he says, "Yeah, thank him that you're here, otherwise I wouldn't have met you." I said, "That's right, you know." But really weird turns in life, you know. That if it wasn't [for] the war, maybe I would have been settled in Korea somewhere with some nice guy, that we're all from a nice family and children not having a divorced parents or who knows, you know. But we make what we have, you know. Yeah, what's given to us and we make it and I'm thankful that we make it or we made it or we're making it. I'm very thankful that my brothers are still healthy and making it and happy. They're able to say they're happy and I'm very happy for that too, you know. So my mother's the only one who doesn't say she's happy still. [laughs] Unfortunately, I think too much was taken out of her life and she's thankful, but I don't think she is able to say 'happy'. Maybe she's afraid to say she's happy. I don't know. But I think a lot of people hesitate to say happy. My mother is one. But when I think of it, I'm like I never understood [this] until I was married and that's the life cycle, I guess. Then one day I realized, "Oh my gosh, she was only twenty-six when she became single with three kids." I was barely marrying at that age. And nobody should have to go through that at twenty-six, war and losing your husband and walking down and having no roots anywhere in Busan, trying to make a living every day. This was just absolutely unthinkable, I think, you know.

Interviewer: Do you two talk about that period much?

No. Maybe in a sense I don't want her to break down. We don't talk about it.

But you know, me being here in this country, in the U.S., in a lot of different circles, we talk about-our identity crisis and the race and the nationality and all of that. And I used to say I don't belong here or I don't belong there, you know? When I look at my mother, I'm like I don't know. I asked her once, "How did you manage or what did you think the future would hold? Did you

ever think that you would come to America, you know - and live here?" And she says, "No. You don't think like that. You just think and live one day at a time. You worry about that day. I was busy worrying about things during that day. I didn't think about the future or think about past, you know. And now that I have enough resources personally, even now when things are not certain, my heart flutters." You know, we do that [talk] at times. And I can't imagine how a naive twenty-six year old woman with three kids, with all the temptations from the boys or the guys, I can't imagine. Oh, it's ugly. But yeah, she somehow managed and I'm sure she has ten thousand stories to tell, but she won't tell them. She just holds it. And that's sad, but also I think I don't want to break her, you know. What she is now is what she is. And we're okay with that. Yeah.

You know, sometimes I'm an extrovert and I like company. I like good friends and I like talking and I like listening and I like women's groups and so on. My mother, on the other hand, I don't know. I've been with her when she is with other people and they talk about... just not much, to me. But that's all. And she goes to church. She's ninety now. And she still goes to church because the pastor comes to pick her up and they go to church. And she sits and she listens to other people talk and whatnot and they go out and have coffee and breakfast and they don't talk much. 'Who's going to eat that half a pancake' is more important. And yet, she keeps going there, so I think she likes the company like that, but she does not tell stories and kind of hash out or resolve or anything like that. Oh I take that back. She's on the phone often. The ladies gossip on the phone, but that's about it.

So, I feel like I'm good. In a sense, I think we are all conditioned, also. Growing up with her for all our lives and spending time with her as grownups together, I know how she is and I know what she is. And the few times that we touched on these serious issues, how she responded, and lately, since 2007, once in a while, I will poke, like the question, "Do you think we could look for?"-she said no. And then, an explanation. I would say, "What was it like when you were going to college from Hamhung? You know, Hamhung was not a small town. North Korea was more developed during that time because of the missionaries and they were more progressive. So more buildings and wealthier in North Korea. So, she doesn't have pictures from that time, but her other friend in Oakland-one time we visited and she had some pictures from high school time. Wow, I was impressed. And so I would ask her, "What was it like going to Ewha from that school [in Hamhung]? "I liked it." I'm like, "What was it that you liked?" And then she told me, "You know, during that time, the girl's school, the high school, the teens, the ladies had long hair before they get married, right? The girls would have long hair coming down like this and when you marry you put it up." She went to Ewha and she didn't like that hair, so she wanted to have it cut. [laughs] And she says because she was at Ewha, the modern women were around and she got the guts to do it, but she still couldn't do it by herself, so she called her father. I guess her father came down to visit or something, or she didn't call-her father happened to be visiting and she knew that if she asked her mother, she would get scolded. But her father would listen to her wish, so she asked her father. So, he took her to barber shop and they did it. So, things like that [she would tell], but other than that, you know, nothing about the Japanese ruling or anything about social issues. I've never heard. All my life, I had to kind of lead her in a sense like that. Yeah, so I'm good and I'm not going to break her now and I don't have that much of a curiosity about people I have never met [in the north]. Kind of wonder about them of course once in a while, you know, what would it have been like. But to me, it's like what would [it]

have been like if my father was around, you know? No. He was never around. That's the reality, so we kind of learned.

I have no memory of my father. Not even one single. People show me pictures. I think my aunt had couple of pictures when I was a baby and my father [was] around.

And I look at it and I feel like I'm looking at a movie, like somebody else's story, not mine. Yeah. I don't remember him at all. No. I got married and immigrated to U.S....

So, then my mother was getting on with her age and she couldn't work at the school any longer and my two brothers were nomads kind of, you know. So, when I got my status here, I invited my mother and my two brothers. So, they immigrated in 1975. Yeah, looking for new life, I think, looking for better life, because as my family, I think, when we were kids, it was rather easier because we didn't have to struggle to make a living, you know. That was adult's job. But when we became adults and at least I was educated and I sought out and I figured out and I went to college and I studied and became a nurse, my brothers didn't. And my mother never really pushed them to study hard or whatever. In that sense, she was weird. She didn't push her boys to study. So the boys didn't go to college and they couldn't find a meaningful job. So we were all like stressed, yeah more stressed, and in a sense, coming here was the savior. And you come here and you could paint and you could make a living. So in that sense, we all made good, made better life here. My brothers, I can't imagine their life in Korea without [a] good education, without good family, without good money background you know.

Some kids with no skills and no social skills or no nothing can live just well if their family has money, but we didn't. We were all stripped of it. So in a sense, immigrating here was a saving grace, yeah. When my cousins or my father's second cousin was around-I think he felt it more because he was adult during the late 50's and early 60's. He wanted to come and study abroad here in the U.S. and they took years to grant him [the permission]. We were kids. My brothers, I think, simply because my mother did not push them like other mothers-my mother did not push my brothers to study. My mother never pushed me to study, I just happened to do it. But they didn't, and when you don't have a good education, it's worse now, but even then, all you can do is some manual labor work and that was tough. So I don't know. My mother must have felt the ripples of my father leaving, going to North like that. But we as kids, except that we were always belittled, that we didn't have enough, but that was just the culture at the time, post war. The mentality of I think so many wars made Koreans really skilled at surviving. [Koreans say] 'we do this' and 'we do that together' and woori, woori, you know, but in real life I never felt that 'woori-ness', that 'we-ness' in Korea. And everyone was busy surviving. And even if you break rules here and break a law there, if you survive and came out okay, everything is forgiven kind of mentality. That's why I never wanted to really live in Korea or go back to Korea, you know. So, when I went to North Korea, in a sense, it was refreshing. The people seemed to be so simple and like not really vying and arguing and fighting kind of thing. I could see from my guide and the government officials, I'm sure there's some of it, but it was the people's faces were different and I like that.

War Legacies

My mother's way of dealing with difficulty after the war, the harshness or not having enough money or not having enough help to raise three kids or whatever, her way of dealing was not [to] talk about it. Never talked about it. So it's like a big void in a sense. And like, she never talked about it. The only sort of affirmation or information that I got was from my maternal grandmother, that she would answer or she would be around us a little more than my mother maybe. So my mother never talked about anything. Never complained, never said it was somebody's fault. Never talked about it. Now, I see, I know that she holds a lot of resentment, personal resentment against her husband who left, my father. You know how bad that was? Like she never told us my father's birthday. We never knew my father's birthday. So lately I asked her again and she says, "I forgot." So she doesn't want to deal with it. How can you forget, right? You lived with the person for five years. I mean, I lived with my ex-husband for four years and I remember his birthday now, you know. So how do you not remember that?

So, I think she was very resentful, even now. She doesn't talk much, even with me. I ask things and then one syllable answer comes out so she doesn't talk much. And I know she was busy always worrying about all sorts of things, but I think also that she might have held it because she didn't want to look like a complainer.

She was a baby of her household [growing up]. She was the youngest and the only girl. So she was somewhat spoiled when she was growing up. And if you see her wedding photos, I mean, she was beautiful. When I was growing up, I think every man around her would drool because she's so pretty. She was very pretty. And so I think [she had] a resentment sort of and sadness that she was abandoned and she wasn't taken care of. And she had to make a living and take care of [everyone],

Her mother and father were a devout Christian. She grew up Christian, but I remember while we were going to church with grandma and grandpa, my mother didn't go to church. She didn't go to church. And nobody explained why and I think I learned early on not to ask many questions that might hurt somebody. [laughs] So I never asked why she didn't go to church.

But, she started going back to church once she immigrated to the U.S., yeah. So I just interpret it as her quietness or her not talking about or not complaining about the harsh things or the sadness and anger and resentment, you know, personal resentment.

I'm really sorry that she held that as so personal, you know. So that's why I don't think she really understood the political issues, you know. I was just so surprised that she took it so personal and held it so personal.

Family Reunion

You know when that came up was 2007 when I visited North Korea. My brother told me that he wanted to look for his dad, our dad, and mother said, "No, don't do it." And I said, "I'm going to go up North and I haven't asked for that [to find her father], but maybe, you know, when I'm up there or if there is any way, should I initiate to look for him?" She said no. And I said, "Why not?" And that's when she told me that, "He left me. How could he leave me with two toddlers and sick, bed-ridden? And he was scared and he left. So he wasn't thinking about anybody else

in the family. He was only thinking about himself,” she said. My mother told me the time that my father left was, okay, he left 1950, September, someday around September 28th, right?

That was 2007 when I asked her that I might [look for him], since I have this chance to go to North Korea for a visit. And there have been many families reunited or just meeting, you know, reuniting for a day or a few hours or whatever, you know, finding their existence, you know, where they're about. Mother's answer was again simple. “No. Don't do it.” And I said “Why not?” And she told me that - that he had left. “Your father had left me and I hold that against him because we were all in hard times. I was bed-ridden with my illness and you were not even four and [I] had another baby like two years [old]. He was actually less than two years. He's probably a year and a half-and a bed-ridden wife and he [her husband] was worried about his safety. He didn't think about my safety and your safety, the baby's safety; he just packed his things and put on his back [pack] and he said ‘I'll be back’ and left. And what he packed in his backpack was money.” Uh huh, that's what she told me. And it's like “okay.” [laughs] Alright, “He was your husband and you don't want to look for him.” And then she said, “Probably he's not even alive anyway and I don't want you to waste your energy looking for his relatives and whatnot in North Korea.” Because she had heard many unhappy stories also about people finding relatives in North Korea and how demanding and stressful it is. So she was telling us not to [go look for him].

Because she believed that my father, though he was, how do I say, associating with the group of people who were socialists, my mother believes that he wasn't even [a] total socialist or complete communist. So she told me then that she believes that after they [the North Koreans] used him up, they would have tossed him. So I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “You know, he took money with him. So when that money ran out, his purpose was [over] because he was not really a hot communist or whatever. So she thought that they [the North Koreans] wouldn't have seen any need for him. So she didn't think that he would have survived that communist regime you know....

In 2007, I had a chance to go to North Korea with some clergy women that someone introduced me [to], seeking or promoting peaceful reunification. And by then, I was just so curious and even if I was a tourist, I wanted to see what it was like. Is it really like the horrible pictures that I've seen? Or is it like a moonscape or what is it, you know? I was very curious. So I decided to go with a group of women and then I went to China and waited for [a] visa from North Korea and went in. And we were there during the spring celebration of the [birthday of the] father of the country, Kim Il Sung, and it was celebration week in Pyongyang. And it was totally a festive town during [the] entire week. And we were put in a very nice hotel and we were given a personal guide and we were taken to many banquets and whatnot. But we were not allowed to communicate or converse with local people. So it's like I looked [at] a movie. I watched a movie and came home. [Our] contacts were the guides or the restaurant servers or the singers and there were a few government officials that we were interacting [with], but that was about it. And when we went outside of Pyongyang, I was seeing the sceneries and the people in the scenes, in the countryside, and I think ninety-five percent of [the] people were all walking. And a very clean country. It was early spring, so it was still bare hills and it was Korea alright. And I saw the Korean azaleas, you know, jindallae, on the hillsides and it was just beautiful. And the rivers were pristine, clean, and so, when I showed all the photographs to my mother, she acted

like she wasn't interested. She was looking at it and she said, "Oh, yeah. Yeah. It's like that. It was like that."

Interviewer: You didn't look for your relatives?

No. We're not a big family and I'm not used to having, I think, the comforts of grandmothers or big families. So I don't know what I'm missing, in a sense. So I didn't really crave that [a big family]. That's another loss, in a sense, that the war brought. You know, Koreans are all about this big relatives and woori, you know, everything "we", woori, woori. "We do this" and "We do that." And I didn't have a lot of that "we" feeling growing up. So I don't know what I was missing. And when this came up [chance to visit North Korea], when mother gave me the explanations [of] why she doesn't want us to search [for their family], I kind of understood that. "And I'm not missing anything and I'm not going to look for anything now," kind of thing. No. That's how it was. So I didn't look. I did ask a question though to a government official. I said my father's relatives were living in Hamhung. "So if I am interested in going there and visiting the town [Hamhung]"-I didn't say to look for him-"I'm interested in looking at the town, you know, at least" and he [the government official] said, "No, you can't go there. We don't have any way of sending you there." [laughs] So I said, "Why not?" He was like, "They used to have visitors, you know, through Red Cross, the South Koreans or Koreans from anywhere were visiting North Korea and their families, [but] that they had created some imbalance, something that's not desirable. So we are not allowing people to go into their homes and their villages and whatever." [This seems to be a reference to some reported issues of visitors giving special gifts to their families that led to discomfort over disparities in villages] "Everybody who's going to meet their families, they're going to meet here in Pyongyang and so if you found your family who lives in Hamhung, then you go to Pyongyang." And the North Korea government will arrange [for] the people from Hamhung to come to Pyongyang and you meet there. You don't go to Hamhung anymore.

And that's what my mother was afraid of too, is like people would go from here with lots of material things, right, and you would leave it there and I think that brought envy to people also and the imbalance of things. And also, if the things would be confiscated by the village officials and whatnot. And then later, after they [visitors] return here, that I've also heard that [North Korean] people would send letters requesting things to be sent [to them]. I know [one of] mother's friend who went and visited his older brother's family and older brother was gone [passed away], but his nephew was living and his nephew sent a letter saying that, "I would like you to send me a pickup truck, money for a pickup truck; then we could do this and that and make a little, whatever, life better or whatever." This minister was not [a] rich person and he didn't have money, so he couldn't send any money for the pickup truck, and I don't know if this is all true or not, but she [mother] said that minister, that moxsanim, could not find the nephew anymore after that. And I'm going like, "Oh no, you can't say that." And she says "Well, that's what I heard." So stories like that, mother was afraid that we shouldn't get into [involved]. So you know, [a] friend of mine who's from North Korea, he still would not think of going to North Korea. He's afraid. So people from North Korea [who live in the U.S. now] have different I guess understandings and feelings and me, I've never lived there and how bad it was, I don't know. So I have no idea. But when mother said, "No," I took that explanation as, "Okay that makes sense. I'm reasonable." [laughs]

War Legacies

Korean War-hmm. My friend Eunju keeps telling me that, “You don't talk about it. But you're a casualty of Korean War.” I know we are casualties of Korean War.

And knowing my father and my mother, they were privileged in that time. You know, he was able to go to Tokyo University and she went to Ewha, and that's a very privileged family. A beautiful looking couple, very good looking couple. So they would have made a good life and I would have been very happy. [laughs] Like a child with, you know, grandmothers and grandfathers and father and mother and all this. And the war ripped us apart, took everything, in a sense. Took everything....

The only three pictures I have, no, two pictures I have of my father, was saved by my older cousin who somehow was able to go into our ripped apart, literally, physically ripped apart, house [in Seoul during the war] and rummage through and found two pictures that's save-able. And one of them is their wedding photo and one is my father and mother and me, just three of us. So, those are the only two pictures of us that [prove] we ever existed. So you know, after that and all the financial resources not being around, and everybody scrounging around in the whole country, nobody could really worry about [helping] your neighbors [laughs] much. So it was basically just very emotionally and economically impoverished. And so I was growing up very timid, unsure of myself, and therefore not talkative or not sharing a lot with anybody else. I guess that's a trait that I took over from my mother. And so even now, I do not have too many childhood friends or girlhood friends. And also another reason is [that] I left Korea so early, but you know, recently, my high school friends, as we get older, they become closer and closer, they meet more often and we have [a] big group in Korea. They meet like every week. Every week. And I'm going like, “Okay, well that's good”, but I wouldn't know what to talk about because I don't have many memories of “us, we”, kind of thing with my high school friends because I was always quiet, in a small, you know, corner or whatever. I didn't mingle much. I remember that. I look at pictures now. I do have pictures from picnics, you know. We used to have Spring picnic and Fall picnic, the school, the entire school will go here and there. It's funny. And I have pictures of the girls like this and I can't even remember all the names. So you know, the high school I went to was a very prestigious school. I don't know, my mother had some weird sense at that time and sent me to that school. And I got into that school and we spent six years. But all the kids there were very privileged, rich and powerful people's kids. So even now, they have so many common things that they can talk about. Your brother, my brother, and you know, so and so and so and so, and this. I don't have any of those. So that's my childhood.

My mother's father was a minister of a church, so he didn't have much of anything, you know. But yes, he lost his church in North Korea and he lost all the connections and all the people that he loved or all the people who loved him or whatever. He left. They had to leave. But my father's father was this jeweler who made money by doing that and that was, in a sense, he had enough material things, but he didn't have the prestigious status. The Koreans are very status oriented, you know, the yangban. Yangban [traditional ruling class in old Korea] is the ones who are scholars or you know, the sons of who and sons of sons and stuff like that. My father's father, beyond that, I don't know much. Nobody ever told me any more of them [their background], the people there. But my mother told me once about what kind of Rhee, you know, our last name's Rhee. What kind of Rhee that is, what clan that is or whatever. But that's all I

know. But my mother was never really a person of talking about the past or the future for that matter.

Family Separation

Interviewer: What do you think of the relatives in the North?

Personally, it's like my second cousins in Chicago. I don't see them. I haven't seen them for thirty years maybe? But they exist. And so, the people in North Korea, I don't even know who are existing there. So truly I have no emotional feelings, personally, to my relatives.

But I know that in my heart and mind that so many of us are so torn apart like that and that my mother-I'm sure if she could-she would love to see her high school friends. And that's so immediate, you know. Like I don't [want to see people], but she does. People like that should be able to see each other, you know. And that's enough reason for me to promote reunification. You know, I know there are a lot of scares and worries about 'if we get together, who's going to feed everybody' and all of that. I think we'll all figure it out. Oh my goodness, you know, earthquake happens and we make it and hail happens and we make it. You know, tornado happens, we make it. But somehow, North and South Korea just can't make it together. That just doesn't make any sense. I think we should just open it up and see what happens. It sounds irresponsible, but I don't know how else because we've been thinking about. Like yesterday I was telling a friend, in the end, whatever we do, whatever just or passionate or compassionate [things] we think and we understand other people, in the end, the honest, ugly truth is we think of ourselves first and we're afraid.

Hopes for the Future

And I think that should go for North and South Korea. We should put that away and that's why I loved seeing the thirty activist women going to North Korea. [The Women Cross DMZ group that crossed from North to South in May 2015]. It's bringing it a little more closer to normalizing, going to North Korea, you know. I know we have a long way to go, but I think more people, more thirty women, or thirty men go up and come back down, or you know, allowing some people from South-thirty people-go up North. Walk up to North. Why just backwards? [North to South] Just go up North. If we can start anything like that; I mean, it has to happen somewhere.

So, that's why I was so happy to see thirty people going in there and coming back down and I'm sure it wasn't easy, but it's showing a possibility. I think when people see each other as people, like when I went to North Korea, I saw people like me. They're all like me. And they're a little more darker because they spend more time out there in the sun walking, but they're like me. And if they see people like us, thinking, "Oh, you're like us," the [North Korean] propaganda some people believe [is that] we are all still starving people in South Korea, you know. So, if we see more and more of each other and acknowledge that we are kinfolks, we are same people, you know, I think it'll be easier to find a way to live together, you know. Personally, I don't really hold a whole lot of love or [am] missing my relatives and whatnot. It's irrelevant in a sense.

Maybe somehow it happens and [border] opens up and in my lifetime that if I get to meet them, I can maybe start a relationship and it might be easier than or quicker than meeting a stranger, I'm sure, you know. And everything else might come. But until then, I don't have the personal missing or yearning. But I think for the entire community, it should happen. It should happen. Just so many stories that I hear from friends. I have a friend who took her mother to North Korea to see her father. Like about twenty years ago and her father was remarried. And I mean, I can't imagine what that was like. That should not have happened. No. It's just crazy.