



LEGACIES OF THE KOREAN WAR

Oral History Project

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Interview with:

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First Generation

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Date of Interview:

December 14, 2014

Liberation from Japan/Pre-War Period

And then the war was over. I really don't recollect much. But right after the August 15, 1945, I attended Sunday school in a Methodist church in town. And I remember people were very much elated. And then in the Sunday school I heard repeatedly how some of the Korean patriots had armed struggles in Manchuria. In Sunday school, I was told.

However I think my grandparents - grandpa - grandfather, and my father and my uncle, right below my father, as educated persons, I think they had very high nationalism. They had a great aspiration to have national independence as Koreans.

I think I was maybe seven or eight at that time. And so that was the beginning of that turmoil. Frightening, terrorizing, instant after instant in southern part of Korea. There were the people elected by the people, to become the head of the town or county, township, and county, and province. And then there were young people who fled north of 38th parallel. Came down. They carried clubs, and they went around town, and then beat the people up. I saw them, you know, people hit on head, and blood. You know, bleeding. And, they took the people [away] to certain place, and beat them up. And say that they are Communist.

And my grandfather was taken by them, and beaten terribly. So because we were sympathizers of the national - independent national government.

They [were] called northwestern youth, *Seobuk Cheongnyun-dan*. Northwestern youth, [Northwest Youth League, an extreme right-wing para-military group] what can I say? They were protected by the U.S. military government. Because 1945 - '48, southern part of Korea was ruled by the U.S. military government.

And my uncle, the immediate younger brother of my father, was teaching at Yonhee University. In those days, Yonhee University, [he was] the English professor there. And so finally, he was fired by his own teacher, Paik Lak-Joon, who was the President of the Yonhee College. Because, my uncle was, you know, his idea was different. He was a sympathizer of the Communism and Socialism.

Korean War Memories

And, then at the beginning of the 6th grade, June 25, 1950, war broke out. It was Sunday. And, on Monday I went to school. And then in the morning we had some kind of physical exercise in class. And then in the playground, in the field, we saw a light plane circle around the air in Seoul. And then the teacher said, "Well, let's go into the building", our classroom. And then he said, "We wait for a while, and then you all go home." So, we knew something was serious. Yes. And, so [June] 28th, three days after, Seoul was occupied. And we heard that through the radio that - Syngman Rhee, the President, left Seoul after midnight.

And, then they bombed or destroyed the Hangang, the Han River, the bridge - main bridge, to the South. And so many people, we heard, the automobiles fell into the river, not knowing, you know, drivers tried to flee Seoul, city of Seoul.

So I was 11 going up to 12. And then I do remember the bombing started in July. And we lived in *Buk Ahyun Dong*. That is a little bit hilly area. We were able to look down when the U.S. bombers came, and bombed the Yongsan, that area, Yongsan Station depot, you know. And bombing and our glass windows were, you know, not completely shattering, but shaken awfully. And it was awful.

And then I do remember, middle of July. July, I don't know why, even I remember the day, July 17. My uncle, the professor, the married uncle, said, in the morning "I go to Pyongyang today." He carried a small bag, and he walked out.

That was the last time I saw him.

He didn't say anything. "I go to Pyongyang today." That's all I remember. I don't know what he told his wife, and that night, I don't know. At the time, I didn't know. Just, because he was a Communist or Marxist, he just went to north, yeah.

But, now I know why. In the north, they invited quite many academicians in all fields, to come and help. Because northern part of Korea - in recent years I have learned that after World War 2, most of the learned people [there] were out of the well-to-do families. Landlords, land ... land rich people. And they all fled to south.

So they [the north] didn't have any professors or academicians to teach at the college level. I learned that. So even quite many professors out of Seoul National University went over, well known professors in medical field, and all fields. They went to North Korea because of their own conviction. So I think, now I know why, because he [my uncle] was one of those.

And then at the end of the month, toward the end of the month, you know, bombing was severe. You know, getting worse. So my fourth uncle and I walked to my home town, Hoengseong, Gangwon-do, Gangwon-do Hoengsong. We walked three days. About 75 miles. Yeah, very scary. But, of course we didn't know what's going on. Not much of the news in those days. But towards September, that September 28, when the MacArthur fleets bombarded Incheon, and cutting through the middle of the peninsula. And we knew that lots of northern troops by foot [were] going up towards the north. Then we knew already on the highway, the southern troops, and U.S. troops, were moving towards the north on the highway. Yeah, it was very much scary.

One day we were hiding in one of the houses beside a small country, path toward the mountain, over the mountain, toward the north. And then northern troops were going by - walking, through that narrow path. Yeah, it was pretty scary. And then, one of those days, the U.S. jet fighter came. And began to burn down my home town. It was about three miles away from my home town - the town. And we were able to see the flames going up, the smoke. I think that was a napalm bombing. Completely flattened, burned down the town. But we had another home in the outskirts of the - the city, Hoengseong. And a few houses were left untouched, fortunately. Well, my grandparents were rich. So we were able to live there that winter.

And then the southern troops [came], and reoccupied the area, they came back to town. It was a frightening time. Many people were taken and tortured because they cooperated with the northern occupation, for short three months. So, they were tortured and imprisoned. Some were executed. They were killed, yeah.

And then, right after Christmas my grandma was shocked. She was under a seizure of a shock, because [her] three sons disappeared. And especially two younger ones on their way, you know, retreating, they might have been killed. And so she was concerned about it, [and] out of the shock, she died. I think that was December 29, 28, something like this. And, we had to bury her temporarily in the front yard of our house.

And then I think, January 2nd we had to go to the south, because another, you know, counter attack, you know, southern troops were withdrawing. So we went to the south in the winter. Yeah, it was horrible, horrible winter. We had ox cart. Ox cart. And this ox, you know, quite an old ox. So we were able to carry our blankets and something, some rice and some food stuff, and flee to south. So from there 10 miles away, there's Wonju, next county seat. My mother is from that town. So we went to her brother's home, spent a night.

Next morning we all started out [on] the highway. You know, highway is just, like here, a state road. We went out of the city, and then a U.S. MP said, "You cannot use this road." Already, my grandpa and my - oh, my three cousins, girls - little girls - had gone [ahead on the road]. So, they went out. But my father and my mother, my youngest uncle, and myself, were left behind with an ox cart. So they [grandfather] didn't know that we were stopped. So we turned around. We went out to another direction and towards the south. Through the mountains, through the mountain paths, you know, pulling that ox cart.

So people pushed that ox cart going up that, you know, rough path. And then, when we reached the Chungju, that's another province, Chungju, and there's a big river. There's ice, you know, covered, frozen. And, somehow we carefully, carefully carried some of the heavy stuff over the ice. It was not far away from north of where we were, the northern troops had come that far. That is the - between the Kyun-gee and Chunjun Buk-do area, yeah. So, then we walked finally to Cheongju, that is the capital city of the Chungcheong bukdo, northern province of Chungcheong. And then towards the west end of the city, we went into the elementary school. We pulled the cart there. And because the school buildings were used for the refugees to stay, we saw our grandfather was there, with our cousins.

Then that winter we crossed Geum River. Geum gang, Geum River. And then we stayed there. And ... my youngest cousin, one year old beautiful girl, she contracted polio. And we didn't have any medicine, nothing. The high fever and she died. Yeah. And so it was very tragic that winter.

We stayed there several months. And then later we moved back to Cheongju.

And, then yeah, that was summer of '51, summer of '51. And my father, losing weight. And then he had symptoms - whenever he ate something, then he couldn't swallow it without vomiting. Losing weight. So my father and my mother went to check it out. And we found out he had cancer. Stomach cancer. Then we went back to our home town. And then he was brought to our home. So September 16, bright sunny day, he died of cancer. I was, yeah, 14 at the time. 1952, 1952. September 16, 1952. Yeah, my father died. And then when we came back to Seoul, so 1954 on.

Postwar Period

And my grandfather was visited by local police, plain clothes police. And [they were] regularly checking on my grandfather, saying that, "Do you know anything about your sons? Okay, if they will come to see you, let us know." That kind of thing. You know, checking up all the time. So that really bothered my grandfather immensely. Sort of intimidation, you know, he felt.

Interviewer: Did that go on for many years after?

Oh, yes, when I finished my college. When I applied for Air Force to be an officer. But I was disqualified because my uncles went to North Korea. Okay, so they didn't give me the [chance], you know, even to apply, and to work as officer in the Air Force. Well I think because of that I'm still, I'm very much idealist, yes. That kind of intimidation and oppressing, and oppressing the freedom of ideas, must be stopped. All the people must have the freedom of speech, and association. And we develop law to live together in harmony, yeah. That's how - that's what I have learned.

And then my mother was very ill. In those days, in Korea, there were lots of Christian so-called evangelists doing some mass revival, evangelistic, you know, rally. And, [in] the large, you know, open field, you know. National stadium kind of things.

So at night, I went over to find my mother, to bring her there. And there were two distinguished persons. One is Presbyterian. He also is a lay person. He is not ordained clergy. And he emphasized the healing of the people, okay. He said, "I'm praying for you." Then, healing power will touch you, and then you will be [healed] - so, my mother attended the rally, out of desperateness, you know, because not much medical care was available.

And there was another evangelist. But he is a Methodist person, Ra Woon Mong. And he was a little bit different. His preaching was very much historical. And one night it was I think, already, I think it was January 20 or 21st. I forgot the date. But, that night the preacher preached about the story of dry bones in the Old Testament. It is in Ezekiel, Chapter 37. In those days, the people were under captivity in Babylon. And this prophet Ezekiel was able to see the vision that our people are like dry bones scattered along the Euphrates River. Along the valley. So somehow he saw the vision. And, he conversed with God. Is any possibility that these dry bones could come alive again? God said, yes, they can.

Somehow, we Koreans became like those dry bones. We fought terrible war. And we became dry bones. We're all scattered. No unity. And he preached, and he pounded the lectern. Somehow, at the time, as a high school boy, that really hit my heart. My goodness. I felt like I was a dry bone. Yeah, I was alive. I ate. But I didn't have any aim in my life. I didn't know where I was going. That kind of, you know, question, somehow. That was my conversion experience. I used to go to the Sunday school as a little boy, you know. But during the war, and junior in high school at that time of war, and refugee situation, of course I didn't go to the church regularly. And so that really hit my heart. So that day I saw, and I cried, my, yeah.

My family, my uncles, all gone. We don't know where they are. My father died. And even you know some tension at home. My mother - single mother, you know, living with single

grandfather. In that kind of settings, family settings and social settings and all, I really - I had a constant headache. Yeah. So I think I was under stress all the time. But, that evening, listening to that guy, awakened my sense of who I am, and how we've been as a people. So because of that, I decided in my junior year - well, 11th grade year, to become a preacher like that person, who can impact the lives of the people.

Well, my new conversion, 1955 winter January, you know, my Christian experience is not just for my own, you know, life or spiritual life. It really compelled me, has compelled me to be responsible to the family, to the community and society, even nation.

So my 17 years of parish ministry in Ohio. And, then 1987, I had an opportunity to work as a staff in one of the United Methodist church's agencies. General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. And I was in the Ministry Division of that board. And I worked there 16 years, until my retirement in 2003. So because of my experience working as a staff in church's general agencies, I have been able to ... put more energy for this issue of healing Korean division.

First of all, many Korean people are still, in my perception, still haunted by the unfortunate past. Fear, distrust, suspicion, and all kinds. So you know, so traumatic, what do we call it - my goodness. So the church leaders began to wonder why. So my answer was, okay, Korean people went through such a difficult time. So they never had a chance to heal such wounds inflicted upon them.

So in 1967, pastors, college professors, and graduate students like me, came together at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and we talked about our situation as Korean American Christians at that time. At that Thanksgiving weekend of 1967, we formed so-called Association of Korean Christian Scholars in North America.

So that group, each year, met at the end of May on Memorial Sunday weekend.

So we scholars, and students, and pastors, we came together to build a support group. And we began to deal with some of our issues, Korean issues, as Christians.

And then finally, 1986 on, they began to deal with separated families issues, and the reunification issues. Then they began to invite North Korean Christians over here each summer. About six years, '89, I think, until '95, we had some summer conference and dialogue.

So that's how my eyes were opened for the healing and reconciliation of Koreans.

Family Reunion

I visited North Korea first. And then at that visit, I met my two uncles. Of course, 1982 through the family finding movement, I found them.

I found out my married uncle, who was the professor, he died in 1952. Because of his English proficiency, he was serving right behind the line, with the Romanian medical team, as interpreter. But he was killed by the bombardment.

But my two younger uncles, one who was born in 1929, and the fourth one [born] in 1931, both of them alive, and married, and had their families. So I met them, so 1950, '60, '70, '80. So 39 years later I reunited with my father's two younger brothers.

Of course, my grandpa - parents - all died, not knowing where they are. And my father died not knowing where his brothers might be.
We just hugged and cried.

Yeah. So that was my eye opening trip, and I found out. Okay, that time, for me to see North Korea. I, as a staff of United Methodist agency.
So that's how I began to do things. And then through the church I really - especially, I just wanted to see that Christian leaders be more concerned about this very, very abnormal, unnatural, divided conditions of their homeland, Korean peninsula.

We have to learn to learn from each other, to respect each other, acknowledge each other and our differences. For the good of the whole entire Korean populations.

Yeah, because we are using one language, we have very similar, you know, traditions. And our division and ideological differences only 70 years. But we do have you know, 5000 years of life together. Same cultures. Same customs, and same languages. You know, so we really need to zero in and uplift this kind of issues.