

[61st] Korean-Americans hope to reunite with NK relatives



Lee Cha-hee, a Korean-American who believes her brother may still be alive in North Korea, gives a speech in Washington, D.C. as lawmakers and advocates for transparent reunions between Korean-Americans and their relatives in the North look on in this photo from 2007.

/ Courtesy of Lee Cha-hee

By Kim Young-jin

A quilt is carefully lain in a private train car. People spill over the top of the train as it departs Manchuria, as Koreans return in thick streams to their newly-liberated homeland.

These snippets are all Lee Cha-hee retains from the day 66 years ago when her family's fate was sealed by a single decision.

That tragic choice was made by her father, who had moved the family to China during Japan's occupation of the peninsula. With Tokyo's defeat in World War II, he packed them into the train headed for their hometown of Daegu. Keeping one of his sons to help him, he promised to rendezvous a week later after tying up loose ends.

It was the last time she saw them. Days later, political lines were drawn, dividing Korea and its people. The chaos deepened with the outbreak of the fratricidal conflict that killed some 3 million and separated countless others.

"It was a bad decision," recalled Lee, barely



The late Lee Sang-moon, left, who lived in North Korea, was separated by the Korean War from his family who later moved to the United States, including his wife and son, seen in this undated photograph. His daughter, Lee Cha-hee, is pushing the U.S. government to

five years old at the time, in a phone interview from Chicago where she has lived for decades. "He wanted his family to go home as soon as possible. But the world was upside-down."

arrange family reunions between
Korean-Americans and their relatives in
the communist state.
/ Courtesy of Lee Cha-hee

She is one of an estimated 100,000 first-generation Korean-Americans who remain separated from their family members in the North, many of whom still yearn to see their parents, siblings or children living in the Stalinist state. With no official channels to contact them, they have long called on Washington to act on the issue and in some cases resorted to dodgy informal methods.

Their plight is gaining traction on the back of grassroots efforts as well as a forthcoming documentary, "Divided Families," recently screened on Capitol Hill. The increased attention comes at an opportune time as Washington and Pyongyang discuss the possibility of holding some form of reunions.

Lee, a leading advocate on the issue, says the sides are tantalizingly close. But with the generation rocked by the war quickly fading, time is of the essence.

Painful stories

"I have a lot of emotional scars," says Lee, a retired librarian, looking back on the journey that brought her to the United States for work but thrust her into fighting for the cause.

In 1988, long after immigrating with her mother and siblings, she learned during a trip to Manchuria that her father, a prominent businessman who had aided anti-Japanese guerrillas, had moved with her brother, Oong-hee, to North Korea in 1950.

Soon after they arrived, the war began and Oong-hee was conscripted to fight. In a cruel twist, Lee's three other brothers prepared for battle in the South. One was later killed by communist forces.

Divided Families, directed by second-generation Korean-Americans Jason Ahn and Eugene Chung, shows that Lee is far from alone in nursing such memories, with the filmmakers crisscrossing the country to collect a host of emotional stories.

Choe Kwang-cho, 73, has no photographs of his parents or siblings and bemoans he has forgotten what they look like. Chun Un-chin, 89, describes a dream she had of traveling to the North to find her three children only to get caught in a blinding snowstorm.

"I ran through the snow calling their names. Then I woke up," she says. "There is no one around who is my age."

The two Koreas have held more than a dozen rounds of reunions after a landmark summit in 2000, bringing together tens of thousands of family members in a reconciliatory project. But Washington has had rocky relations with the North during that time and focused most of its attention on ending Pyongyang's nuclear program.

With no similar events to hope for, the immigrants struggled to raise their issue with their government due to language barriers and apprehension over revealing their family ties in the North.

Choe Kwang-cho and others took matters into their own hands by contacting black-market brokers in the United States and Canada to connect them with their loved ones.

Such middlemen were rampant in the 1990s when Korean-Americans, sensing their parents in the North were nearing death, shelled out up to \$40,000 in cash up front to somehow get connected with long lost family members. They exist today in smaller numbers mostly in Los Angeles and Canadian cities, operated by Koreans with channels with the North, Lee said.

Some were able to obtain information and even visit China or sometimes North Korea for reunions, activists said. But the informal channel is a slippery slope as results greatly vary and many have been completely swindled by the brokers.

Making progress

The last 10 years, Lee says, have been heartbreaking as she's watched many elderly Korean-Americans with divided families pass away. Undeterred, however, she and other grassroots organizers have managed to raise the issue onto the national agenda.

"Convincing (the government) about the urgency of the divided family issue was a difficult job," said Lee, now head of the Coalition to Reunite Korean Americans with their North Korean Families.

In 2006, Saemsoni, a project that has promoted reunions for Korean Americans, began a pilot program with then-Representative Mark Kirk (R-IL), now a senator, to officially request the two governments to arrange a family reunion for Lee.

In 2008, the group helped spearhead the first piece of binding legislation regarding divided family members, directing the President to report to Congress on the efforts of the government for reunions between U.S. citizens and their North Korean relatives.

Now amid expanded contact aimed at resuming six-party talks on the North's denuclearization, the issue has finally surfaced on the agenda. After a rare U.S.-North meeting in July, a North Korean official said its Red Cross Society was "positively considering" allowing temporary reunions for Korean-Americans.

Robert King, the U.S. special envoy on North Korean human rights who participated in the talks and traveled to the North earlier this year, recently wrote to Lee's coalition, saying the American Red Cross had taken the lead on the issue and that he hoped "we will be able to make progress."

He urged the coalition to encourage Korean-Americans interested in meeting relatives in North Korea to contact their local American Red Cross, saying the next step was to identify those with a reunion wish. "We are in the final stages, I believe, to make it happen," said Lee.

While she still hopes to meet her brother Oong-hee, the advocate says she has her priorities, hoping first to connect older Korean-Americans such as Chun Un-chin with their children in the North.

Flying back home

As arduous as it has been for Lee to push for transparent reunions, so too has the work of piecing together the story of her father, Lee Sang-moon, who she last saw spreading blankets in a train car bound for Daegu.

The biggest piece fell into place in 1992, when her nephew, a minister, visited the North. Upon returning to his hotel room one day, he found Oong-hee waiting for him.

Lee Sang-moon, the family discovered, became a marathon runner, garnering fame for completing a race in his early 70s among other feats. His daughter says the running was a pursuit to get out the message that he was in the North and stay healthy so he could one day meet them.

She also learned that her father, who died of food poisoning, had a final wish: to be buried on a hillside he often ran to, facing the South, where he believed his family to be.

In the United States, Lee said that many divided family members, living with "black holes in our hearts," have tried to shield their own children from feeling such pain.

But she noted that the effort to raise awareness on the issue had spawned an

inspiring development. The second generation, such as the directors of Divided Families, has taken the torch in the fight — providing a measure of healing.

“We wanted our children to fly far, far away from our generation’s tragedy. But when they grew up, some of them flew back to their heritage. Now we have our children standing next to us sharing our burden. It’s like a having a million people in your army,” she said.

