

Bok Cho's Interview Transcript

Lauren Cho: My name is Lauren Cho, today is October 22, 2023 and I am interviewing my grandpa, Bok Cho, for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Bok Cho: Yes.

LC: Awesome.

LC: Would you like to introduce yourself and explain your connection to Korea?

BC: Myself? My name is Bok Cho and I'm grandfather to Lauren Cho. I was born in Korea—Gimje, Korea—and my parents were living in Manchuria. As soon as I was born, I moved to Manchuria. That time Manchuria was kind of a Japanese colony and Korea was a Japanese colony. Also, Manchuria was occupied by the Japanese. My father worked for a Japanese company, a coal mining company, as a chauffeur for the CEO. That time, he was a big guy, you know? I remember until about four or five years old, I still remember, I lived in Harbin. It was a big city, most north big city, then it was Harbin, right now they call it Sinyang. I lived there until my father died in a car accident at midnight chauffeuring the CEO to the company. My father died and at that time I was four and a half, five years old. Then I moved back to Gimje, Korea. So, you get it? What I'm saying? The reason my father is working in Manchuria, that's why we went there, and then after my father died we came back to Gimje, okay? And then a year and a half later my mother remarried, and I went off from five to twelve years old with my

father's side grandmother who I grow up with, okay? And, in time, my mother was living in Seoul and she had three kids (half brothers/sister) and she somehow broke up with her husband, and, so at that time my half brothers and sister were living with their father and my mother was living alone. That's why I went with my mother in Seoul and stayed with her for one and a half years. At that time, I was fifteen years old—no, no, fourteen years old—and when we were living there the Korean War erupted. North Korea invaded South Korea. I was in Seoul. I saw all of the things, refugees, whatever. We evacuated Seoul to Gimje, my hometown. My mother stayed there and it was in 1950 and I was wandering, because at that time all refugees my age go there and I end up in Busan. At that time, I was all alone. My mother is living with my half brothers and sister. She's there and I was alone, okay? Drifting around, no home. That time, it was not only me drifting around, a lot of kids, a lot of people in Busan. Now how far do you want me to go? Until I got married?

LC: That was a great start. A great overview. Now I'm going to get into some more questions. That was good. I'm going to ask you some more questions now. So, you talked about Gimje, your hometown. While you were in Korea do you remember the community or any of your friends?

BC: I don't have any friends over there.

LC: Not right now, but when you were there. Do you have any memories?

BC: When I lived in Gimje, I lived there for seven or eight years, lived in Gimje. School kids...When I left Gimje, I didn't have any connection, I don't know anyone. No friends at all, no connection at all. I hardly go there, my mother was not there. Only my father's side grandmother is living in Gimje. She brought me up until twelve-years-old, and twelve-years-old is when I went to Seoul to join my mother.

LC: Nice. So, you talked a little bit about being in Manchuria and why you had to move there. Would you like to talk a little bit more about Manchuria?

BC: Okay, I remember, Manchuria is occupied by the Japanese. The Japanese treat Koreans like second-class citizens. And they treat Chinese like third-class citizens; discrimination. My father is working with a company; a good job. I remember street cars; a lady holding me. I barely remember. At a zoo I saw a big snake on a tree. That was very interesting, I'll never forget that. Also, then sugar cane, do you know sugar cane? In a stick? At that time, the Chinese had it in as a stick. I bought it and brought it home and kept it. I remember that. And the bridges and looked down and saw the cars passing, I remember and outside of the city there was a big bank and for the first time I saw coal. That's what I think I remember at three and a half, four. Sometimes I think, is it true or a dream? I don't know but it's always stayed with me, that memory.

LC: Yes.

BC: And after my father died, we came back to Gimje.

LC: You mentioned something about a snake? A snake in your memory. Did you say that? Do you want to explain a little about that?

BC: I told you in Zoo. A big snake coiling in a tree. It stayed in my head. I was four-years-old.

LC: So then when you returned back to Korea after your time in Manchuria, do you have any memories of the move or if it was hard?

BC: I come back to Korea. I lived with my father's side grandmother because my mother remarried and then I was a very lonely boy. I didn't get love from my grandmother.

LC: So, while you were growing up, I'm not sure during a time of war... You grew up during a time of war, right? So, I'm not sure how this would have affected you, what things you did for fun?

BC: Korean War?

LC: Yes, with the war, during that time period so do you remember ever playing sports growing up or any games that you played? Even as a teenager or older.

BC: That time the Korean War started June 25th, June 26th, and all of the refugees were coming.

I saw it and then my mother's side grandmother was visiting and she was going back and I

followed her and at that time as soon as we crossed over the Han River, the big Seoul river, the bridge blew up.

LC: Just in time.

BC: And I went to Gimje when I was fourteen years old and mother's side grandmother said my mother is still in Seoul and she gave me a pack of rice to bring to my mother. And from Gimje to Seoul is a five day walk and I was only fourteen years old and slept on the street and the bank of the river and at that time the US airplanes were flying, shooting, and people walked with me and some died. I'm just going to Seoul and finally on the sixth day I get to Seoul and on the Han river there's a small boat at that time, American jets shooting when I was crossing over with a small boat. And all day long I walk, the airplanes are bombing and that's a big benchmark for me, fourteen-years-old. Five-day walk, how many miles, 250 miles, I think, 200 miles? I'm thinking, every day. In Korea we use miles not kilometers. At least a day, twenty – twenty-five miles a day.

LC: Everyday? Wow! So, you were moving with other people your age?

BC: That time a lot of people but I followed a North Korean soldier, he's going back to the North. I followed him, he took care of me, and sometimes we ate. I remember that's how I got back to Seoul.

LC: So, you got back to Seoul by following them?

BC: Yes.

LC: What were your thoughts on the Americans? Did you like them, did you think they were helpful?

BC: No, it was a North Korean soldier that time. North Koreans occupy all of Korea, except Busan, Daegu and the southeast corner, a small part. North Korea occupied it for three or four months. Americans came out and pushed them back.

LC: When the Americans came by, did you have interactions with them? Did you talk to them?

BC: No.

LC: So, you touched on this a little bit, even being so young. What do you remember about the Japanese occupation?

BC: That's when I was four.

LC: Oh, just when you were four-years-old?

BC: Yes, I told you, I was just four-years-old.

LC: What was it like when Korea separated into North and South? Did you have any family in the North?

BC: Okay, after the end of the Korean War, there was the World War. 1945 and the South was occupied by United States and the North by the Soviet Union. 38 Parallel divided and what are you asking about? What are you asking?

LC: Just your thoughts about the split? What were your thoughts about North Korea? And did you have any family in North Korea?

BC: No, no family in North Korea. We didn't have any.

LC: Ok, this is another part. After the Korean War, what were your thoughts on the future? Were you worried about the future?

BC: During the Korean War?

LC: After the Korean War.

BC: After the Korean War, I was in Busan at that time. And I work from fifteen-years-old, I learned typing. I went to typing school at sixteen years old. I worked for the USIS (United States

Information Service), part of the State Department. I was a typist for work for about one and half years and, in the meantime, I went to high school. I was alone. And then, at that time, I saw the exchanging of POWs. Do you know what POW means?

LC: Prisoners of War.

BC: For North Koreans for Americans. About 4,000, they're leaving by the train and the South Koreans sent North Korea POWs, exchanged. I saw it and then at night we got the news by radio that the Soviet Union, Stalin, the dictator died. That's what I remember that year, 1953. And then, as I said, at night I go to high school, and daytime, working. Not many attending the school, a whole mess during the war. So, after that I worked for three years with the agency and then back to government when the war started. Korean war in Busan and then in 1954 I went back to Seoul. Nineteen-years-old; university. I worked one and a half years and then I got drafted to the military. I started college '55-'56, one and a half years and then I went to the military. Three years I stayed there until mandatory three-year service. That's 1959 and then I was wondering where to live, about my mother, where she was, but there was nowhere to stay with her because of her circumstance. So, I went to church in a mountain seminary. I stayed there reading the bible about five or six months, reading the bible. Different denominations, different ministers come and give lectures. I was thinking to become a minister. And then the following year, 1960, I came out from the mountains and there was a Korean student revolution, demonstration, a whole mess from the dictator. Oppress from the dictator. A new government formed, there was one year of a new government and then the following year there was a coup, the dictator took over. In the meantime, I got a job by examination, a government job. 1961 a

government job, dictatorship came out. That's how I started working in the government, 24-25 years old and that's my experience, work.

LC: Nice. So, you talked a little bit about your school, what you did while in school. You talked about the work you did while you were in school. In your off-time, when you weren't working, what were you doing? Do you remember?

BC: Okay, daytime working. At night, I went to night school.

LC: So, you got off of your work and went right to school?

BC: Daytime, working and at night, a lot of schooling, night class.

LC: I see.

LC: And then, you also talked a little bit about the student demonstrations?

BC: I came out from the mountains, the seminary. And then there were student demonstrations. Chaos, chaos. They formed a new government. They were drafting new employees, that's how I got the job. After examination, I got hired and one year later, a military coup and then dictatorship. I worked for the government for fifteen years until I came to the United States.

LC: So, that kind of leads us to our next period of your life. What influenced you to immigrate to the United States? Why did you choose to immigrate to the US?

BC: I got the job. In time, I married. I had three kids. The reason is I had a good government job, like a treasury department job in the United States. Also, I didn't like dictatorships. I know US customs because I work for Busan, the US agency. I have three kids and I was coming to the United States. My half-sister got to the US as a nurse's aide in 1968 when the United States first opened immigration for Asia. She is part of the first and she came to Sanford (ME) and met her husband and was living in Lebanon (ME) and she is still living there (*Komo*). She never worked. And she came to Korea with her first kid (Kevin) and pregnant with Tasha and visits. At that time, I asked, "I would like to go to the United States, can you invite me?" And that's how. I have a good job and a good house, good family. No reason to go to the US. Everybody, my friends say I'm crazy, forty years old, three kids - I don't have any experience except government work, accounting. And people say I'm crazy! But in my mind, I don't like the government. I came alone and then two years later I invited the whole family. First my sister, *Komo* (paternal aunt), invited me and then I invited my whole family. That's why I ended up in Sanford. I never worked physical work, labor work and then I got a job, an electronic manufacturing job at Sprague. I was really upset with myself, "Why did I come over here?" Then your father's mother had heart problems and then two and a half years later she passed away. I was alone with three kids to bring them up, I have to work hard.

LC: Yes, you certainly did work hard, you made a great life for him and all of us. So, leaving Korea, was it hard to leave your other family and friends back home?

BC: Back home, other family?

LC: Yes, was it hard to leave them when you decided to leave for the US? So, your other family?

BC: My mother and two half-brothers. Cho is a big family, cousins, even in NYC. First cousins are medical doctor, professors, they came early. Before their mother died, I was thinking to go there, I didn't think I'd stay here (Sanford, ME) but with three kids, no way. So that's why I've stayed here for 47 years. One place, one job, credit union manager until I retired. One job, one house. Before this we lived in an apartment for 6 years. Even my banking account when I came in '76 is the same account number, even though the bank has changed 10 times!

LC: Wow!

BC: One house, one job!

LC: What was the assimilation process in Maine? Adjusting to life here in Maine? I know my dad has told me you were the only Korean family here when you first moved. What was that like?

BC: When I moved here, no Koreans, no Asians at all. We are the first Asian, Korean family actually. Your Uncle, Yu-Sung... Somehow all of my children are tall and I don't have any discrimination here, I don't feel any discrimination at all. Also, when people see my children,

they say, “Where are you from? How come you are so tall?” (Laughter). A lot of funny stories about Yu-Sung; kids were teasing him calling him telephone pole. Very good town, no discrimination at all. You ask your father, just a good town. Very comfortable. When I got here, Sanford was all Canadian, French descendants. Seventy percent of residents are Canadian from Quebec. Canadian French in Sanford. They were speaking French. Women were. It’s actually a French town. A lot of French names. Even Sarah’s husband is French-Canadian. So, I didn’t have a difficult time. Also, I had a credit union manager job. I had three or four ladies work for me.

I’m not popular because I’m so tough, people don’t like me.

LC: Oh, no.

BC: I’m so tough, people come and ask me to borrow money. I was tough and people go to my boss and the women crying about me. I wasn’t popular myself because I’m tough. I thought I would get fired. My boss said I have a temper. One guy told me you are worse than Irish temper. But still, I’m here. At my age, everyone is gone. At 87, I’m here. What’s the next question?

LC: Did you enjoy the job though?

BC: Enjoy? My job? Yes, because I enjoyed it because I’m the boss and I could make it how I like. Yes, I had a good job, lucky.

LC: That's nice. You talked about... I didn't realize that this was such a French-Canadian town. That must have made it harder for learning English when you first came over. Do you think that made it harder to learn English since there were so many people speaking French around you?

BC: Yes.

LC: It must have been harder. Did you have any friends or neighbors that helped you out?

BC: First of all, when we came, we had good friends. The Gallagher family, the husband is a schoolteacher. I connect with the schoolteacher because when I come over here, I don't speak English. I go to night school. I met the English teachers at the high school and they became our friends. And also, they come over for tutoring, Gallaghers, high school teachers, they came to my house and they taught Yu-Sung, your father, and SuJin private tutoring after school. The people are really so nice. Still friends. So right now, they have their own family but your father doesn't go to meet anybody.

LC: Well, that's very nice of them. For how long was it just you guys, as the Asian family, in town? Eventually did other Asian families move here?

BC: Okay. '76 we were the only Asian family, Korean family. After that, two years later '78, a lot of Vietnamese, Cambodian refugees come here. Even our church sponsored Vietnamese families. So many Vietnamese and Cambodians here right now. A lot when your father was attending school, high school at the time. Still, Korean family, only us. No Korean families.

LC: No Korean families?

BC: No.

LC: Did you get along with the Cambodian families that came in?

BC: No contact. No. We don't know them at all.

LC: So, they kind of separated themselves when they came here?

BC: In Sanford, they came, they have their own houses. We didn't associate with those people, we didn't know them at all.

LC: I can imagine it must have been difficult to continue making Korean food, for example, I'm sure there weren't many Korean supermarkets.

BC: What?

LC: Korean food.

BC: Korean food?

LC: So, coming here, I'm sure there weren't many Asian markets or anything that you could get.

BC: We went to Boston for Korean [food]. Boston had Arlington at that time. A Korean store there. And a Korean store on 495 in Ayer, Massachusetts. Actually, we didn't eat that much Korean food. Only Kimchi. [Laughter]

LC: So, did you try to continue any Korean traditions or anything while you were here?

BC: Not at all. Because when I brought them up here... YuSung was ten-years-old, Hyun was eight-years-old, SuJin was six-years-old and we didn't teach Korean at all. The reason I saw that, they came to the United States, if they are going to go back to Korea, they need the Korean. If they live here, die over here, they become American and I wanted them to speak perfect English. And over here, there no Korean neighborhoods. Just talking with me and mom but they gradually lost Korean. That's why right now they ask "Why didn't you teach me Korean?" Now Koreans are all over the place. That time, you live here, you have to speak perfect English. That was my focus. I didn't teach them.

LC: Have you returned to Korea since moving here or back to Asia at all for trips?

BC: I returned to Korea two or three times. First time, after nineteen years. I came in '76 and first visit was 1995. Nineteen years. I didn't have a chance to go, I was always with three kids, bringing them up, my life was for the kids. And then in 2000, YuSung and Yohan went to Korea.

LC: What was your first trip like? What was it like, what did you do?

BC: When Korea, what was it like?

LC: Yes.

BC: Korea a lot of changes. Big changes. A lot of cars. Surprised. Very surprised. No different than the United States at that time. Lifestyle is like American culture.

LC: Was there anything special you did? Any events? When you went back to Korea, was there anything in particular that you liked doing most?

BC: No, not really. Just see the people and friends. Coworkers and impression developed. No different than the United States. I was surprised. Really surprised. That's my impression.

LC: It was very surprising. I'm sure there has been plenty of change. So, you said you went twice? You went two times? Who did you go with? Did you go by yourself?

BC: First one, myself. Second time YuSung, Dana, Yohan and me. We went to Korea and Singapore. And Sujin one week. We went separately but then we joined. We stayed in my relative's apartment, house, big house apartment. We went to Singapore and then YuSung, Dana joined. Her sister's husband was working for a Korean bank in Singapore, that's why we went there.

LC: Ok, now going back to America. Knowing how your kids had the opportunity to play lots of sports and games and play with other kids. My dad and his siblings. They were able to play so many sports...

BC: He played baseball. First of all, YuSung was so tall, he liked to play basketball. Coach didn't have him play because of his heart problem. He was so mad, swearing. He couldn't play. He had Marfan syndrome. Your dad played soccer, baseball. Babe Ruth baseball, he was doing good. Regional championship. In Korea, it's different than the United States.

LC: So how does that compare to the way your kids played, how does that compare to your childhood, playing games and stuff?

BC: When I was a child, we didn't have sports like this in this country. They had only softball at school and soccer they played. Other than that, no recreation at all under the Japanese. And in the North, no basketball, no football, no comparison, nothing at that time when we were growing up. No recreation, nothing.

LC: Were there no games?

BC: Big difference. Nothing. Poor country, Korea. No recreation for the children. But when they come here, they play baseball, soccer, basketball. Yohan played hockey. Big difference. No comparison.

LC: Very different. No games, either?

BC: No. Nothing. Big difference.

LC: That was very nice that you were able to give them the opportunity to play all those games here in America.

BC: When we were living in Seoul where they were born. YuSung was a boy scout and we were camping. YuSung was eight-years-old. We went in the river and I almost drowned with YuSung. We were playing cross over to the other side and the suddenly the dam opened and I'm not a good swimmer. We almost died. Even at that time they didn't have sports. Now in Korea, they have sports, right now, baseball, basketball, volleyball, soccer. At that time when I grow up, nothing.

LC: So even when your kids lived in Korea, I know it was only a little time, when your kids lived in Korea, even then, there were no sports then? What was it like raising your children in Korea versus America? I know it was only a little time in Korea, but...

BC: Big difference. Then developing country. Children sports were different. Eight, ten, seven years. The school system is different there than over here. They have sports but very few kids do it, not like over here. Before they came over here, they had to know swimming. They learned swimming at the YMCA. The only thing I remember over there was boy scouts.

LC: So, would you say it was easier to raise them in America versus Korea?

BC: Oh yes, much easier. No comparison. Honest, no comparison. Right now, big difference. At that time, it was a different country. It was a very poor country, especially after the Korean War. No industry.

LC: Well, I think that's all the questions that I have. Was there anything that you wanted to talk about that I didn't bring up?

BC: Difference. Three generations. When your grandfather grew up no comparison with my kids, no comparison. They have a lot of opportunities. Now, your father is bringing up you guys differently. School activities now more than your dad's generation. Then it was Sunday school. Kids weren't coming and going. School activities, regional, town activities. Kids are all over. The church is now dying. Their generation, no comparison with my generation. Much, much better. Now your generation is better than their generation.

LC: Was there anything from your time in Korea that maybe I didn't bring up? It could be about anything.

BC: No.

LC: Well, I think that concludes our interview. Thank you for your time. I really appreciate you sharing your stories and everything. Thank you.