

# ChonSoniaKim\_2023-10-27

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Korea, Korean, father, life, friends, mother, parents, remember, brother, memories, emigration, immigration, Adventism, identity, loss

## SPEAKERS

Sonia Chon, Nano Chon

### Nano Chon

Hello, my name is Nano Chon. Today is October 27, 2023, and I am interviewing my mother, Sonia Kim Chon, through an in-person interview 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?

### Sonia Chon

Yes.

### Nano Chon

So, Mom, are there any particular topics or areas that you're excited to delve into during this interview?

### Sonia Chon

I'm actually really excited to share things about my own personal Korean history that you and I've never really discussed or that you don't know.

### Nano Chon

Could you please introduce yourself and explain your connection to Korea?

### Sonia Chon

My name is Sonia Chon, and I was born in Seoul, Korea, in 1963, and then emigrated to the United States, on January 7th of 1970. I was almost seven-years old, and we were sponsored by my mother's adoptive mother, who had emigrated to the US sometime, I think, in the 1950s.

### Nano Chon

Can you please tell me about your childhood in Korea?

### Sonia Chon

Well, let's see, I don't have that many memories. My father, being a prolific photographer, had many, many photos of my childhood there, and so sometimes I get confused as to whether they're actual memories, or they're memories that I formed from the photos. But I remember the – my father would take me on his bicycle because he rode a bicycle to work, and he would take me from my piano lessons, riding on the back of his bicycle. I remember a swing that he had made for me in our front yard and swinging as high as I could and jumping from it. What else do I remember? I remember the small

church, the Adventist church, that we used to attend. I remember these little – I call them little “pussy willow” plants, and I would go picking them and then making daisy chains out of little daisies, from the grass, things like that. Pretty much happy memories.

**Nano Chon**

Very nostalgic. Can you expand upon those religious influences that you referenced and what you grew up with in terms of religion?

**Sonia Chon**

Earliest memories are of that small church, on the grounds of the Seoul Sanitarium SDA (Seventh Day Adventist) Hospital there. And then, when we immigrated to the United States, they were part of my main community. I grew up in the Korean-Adventist community as the core of my parents’ social circle, even though they allowed me to expand wider into my own group of friends. But I attended our church elementary schools and attended American church for Sabbath School and then go to the Korean Church for second church services. I kind of navigated between those two worlds.

**Nano Chon**

I see. So, transitioning to that topic of immigration did you expect to leave that way of life? Did you understand what was going on when you were immigrating?

**Sonia Chon**

I understood and remember leaving. I remember the day that we left my parents' friends – my father had many friends, and they all came to the airport. We have photos of our family and their family and various photo shots. I remember the flight over on PanAm airlines and the stewardesses being extra nice to my brother and me giving us rice, soy sauce, and sesame oil for us to eat. They gave us the PanAm wings. I remember our layover in Hawaii and using the bathroom there. My mother had made sure that I had many of these A-line dresses made before we came to the United States. I had one on that had long sleeves, and I remember getting soap and water on the sleeves and being upset that I had gotten, soap and water on my lovely, new dress, things like that. So, I remember that trip and I think being almost seven, I remember much more than my brother did.

**Nano Chon**

I see. Can you tell me the main reasons that you and your family immigrated? So, you were sponsored, but the choice and decision?

**Sonia Chon**

My parents did this as choice. My mother was a pharmacist in Korea, and my father studied law and then became – because of religious reasons and conflict with the Sabbath – he became a laboratory technician, medical technologist is really what I think it is. Anyway, they just thought that they would have – my brother and I would have a much better life. This is a very typical immigrant story, that our opportunities would be greater if we came here. So, they actually sacrificed a much better quality of life for themselves because pharmacists did very well there to a much harder life to come here to the States. But yes, it was because they just wanted a better life for my brother and me. That's really what it is. Yes.

**Nano Chon**

Beautiful. So, when you arrived, what sort of community did you move into? Where did you move? Did it feel like home during that time? And how long did it take to get to that point?

**Sonia Chon**

Well, initially, we lived for just I think a few months. I don't actually know the time periods. But it wasn't very long that we lived with the adoptive grandmother, my mother's adoptive grandmother, who excuse me, my mother's adoptive mother, who sponsored us. We lived with her and her husband in East Los Angeles in their home. Then, our parents purchased a home in a nearby suburb called San Gabriel. And we grew up there pretty much. Could you ask the question one more time?

**Nano Chon**

Yes, what sort of community did you move into? Did it feel like home?

**Sonia Chon**

Alright, so the community would have been the Korean Adventist community, which that was always in the back of my mind. They were like the people that my parents associated with. My mother initially was a nurse in Korea, and she graduated from and worked at the Korean? No Seoul, SDA or Seventh Day Adventist Sanatorium hospital and so many of those – her friends and classmates also immigrated to Los Angeles. And so, they and their families became part of this greater community for us. So, we would see them at church on Sabbath. We would do family things with them, whether it was parks or going to someone's house in the afternoons, so that was that main community. And then of course, I created my own community within the elementary school that I attended, as well. My sense of home, I don't I ... I don't think I really remember what a sense of home was. My sense of home was with my parents, feeling safety, feeling happiness, those kind of things. That was all there. I don't think that ever changed. I don't remember a time when I felt afraid. I do remember going to school and not being able to speak or understand the language [laughter]. But they put me into a class with, I guess it was English for foreign students. Or actually it was children was who were just struggling to read, I guess. And I remember – because I came in January, I had three months of first grade. And then they gave my mother the books, the rest of the books, reading books for first grade, and if I could read all those by the time school started in the fall, I could go on to second grade, which of course, I did [laughter]. And so there was a two-week window of time where they said that I could not – I was told this, because I don't remember this, but I could not speak or understand Korean, or speak or understand English that it was a two week-ish period of confusion.

**Nano Chon**

I see. So, was Korean spoken in the home as you were growing up before you immigrated? After you immigrated?

**Sonia Chon**

My mother was very proficient at English, so she spoke English and Korean. My father, on the other hand, I think felt more comfortable speaking Korean. But many times, when people asked me this question, I just remember understanding my parents and not distinguishing: "Did they speak to me in

Korean? Or did they speak to me English?" Because my father, I do remember this distinctly, when I was very young, and we had immigrated. He said to me – he almost charged me with, "Sonia, you're going to live in the United States, this is you're going to be your home. You need to be able to speak English better than American speak English, therefore, I want you to speak English, and you holding on to or maintaining your Korean isn't as important." Yes, yes.

**Nano Chon**

Would you say that during this transition period, that people in the community where you moved into gave you difficulties? Like were there any difficulties from other people that you experienced in terms of the fact that you were an immigrant that you were Korean? In that sense?

**Sonia Chon**

Because I went to our Adventist schools? I don't think so. Actually, we had a really large Asian population at San Gabriel Academy. The principal was a Japanese-American of Hawaiian descent, and it was a woman. Most of my friends, or many of my friends were Asian, whether they were Korean, not as many Koreans, but definitely Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, and Filipino. Now, if you ask me if like maybe children in the neighborhood, did give us a little bit. We got the usual name calling and things like this. But actually, I remember somebody calling me a "chink", and I said, "You're so stupid. You couldn't even get that right. I'm not Chinese." So, things like this. But yes, but nothing horrifying.

**Nano Chon**

I see. This is a very broad question. But how do you feel – how do you hypothesize that life would have been different, had you not immigrated?

**Sonia Chon**

This is a very good question. I actually have thought about this, of course. I remember going back to Korea for the very first time, in I think it was 2000, 1999 or 2000. My mother was ill at the time, and I took her back to Korea to visit her friends, some of the nursing school friends who never emigrated. Wwe stayed with one of her friends whose husband had done very, very well. These were very wealthy people, and I remember her daughter coming to visit my mother and then getting a phone call from her mother-in-law, and she did not answer it. She told us that she couldn't answer it because her mother-in-law pretty much tracked where she was and what she did, and she was very beholding. This was very, I guess, traditional? I'm not sure. But I felt like that was such – I couldn't have dealt with that type of – somebody else controlling my life like that and thinking, "Oh my goodness, if I had stayed, this would have been my life." And I wouldn't be who I was, this independent person who got to do what I wanted, think what I wanted, that type of thing. So, thank goodness my parents moved to the United States.

**Nano Chon**

I see.

**Sonia Chon**

Yes.

**Nano Chon**

So that was a great choice?

**Sonia Chon**

For me, it was a great choice. For my parents, financially, it was a much harder journey. Yes. Yes.

**Nano Chon**

So that was the topic of immigration. We're going to switch to a more general tract again. Can you describe or just remember and just talk about any core memories from your entire past, whether in Korea through your entire life up till now that are nostalgic in terms of family, friends, and successes? Very broad, very broad. Specifically, we'll start with this. Do you have any mementos that you've kept from your childhood or that you remember if maybe your father had or your mother had maybe your brother?

**Sonia Chon**

Yes. Both my parents have passed. My father, very early in 1986. I was very, very close to him. And I actually have a red, wool sweater that he used to wear. He looked fabulous in red, and it was his favorite sweater. I still have that. He has a scarf, or he had a scarf, a silk scarf that he wore in Korea, and brought with him. I have that. He has these fabulous cufflinks that he also brought with him. I have that. And also, I have some of his camera equipment, which was so important to him, and I keep them [emotional].

**Nano Chon**

I'm sorry if this is difficult.

**Sonia Chon**

No, it's not difficult. It's just wonderful. I keep them in my bedside table, and I look at them. And I have all the albums that are filled with the photos that he took us in my bedroom in a special cabinet. So yes.

**Nano Chon**

Wonderful memories. Sorry. Can you describe any hobbies or pastimes that you shared with family and friends throughout your life, and do they differ from when you were in Korea, when you were growing up here or even later in life?

**Sonia Chon**

My own activities?

**Nano Chon**

Yes, your own pastime that you shared. Or maybe pastimes that aren't yours that you specifically remember?

**Sonia Chon**

Okay, well, that swing that my father made for me – I was quite a swinger. I did it even when I came to the States. I loved swinging, and then jump – going as high as I could, and then jumping and seeing how far I could jump. I did that over and over and over again. My father was ... really, really big into

sports, and he would tell me stories about his snow skiing, his ice skating. And he loved soccer. And he loved tennis. He loved just all sports and just lots of activities, fishing, and he taught all these things to us in my childhood. Maybe not so much Korean memories, but definitely here in the States. My parents were always the parents that if we went with the church group, let's say the young kids would go camping. My parents were always the chaperone parents who went with us on these camping trips because he was very good at being outdoors and things like this. So yes, he taught us. He shared his love of sports, and his love of fun with us. My mom, I don't mention as much because she was the real responsible one. She was very focused on making sure everything was happening and whatnot. And he was the fun person in the family.

**Nano Chon**

I see. So, from these memories of these happy times, the stuff you have today, how do you feel it's influenced what you do today or how you approach life? I'm sorry, it's a broad question.

**Sonia Chon**

My approach to life or my approach to how I raised you or...?

**Nano Chon**

I suppose it is open ended. In the terms of the word influence, I would say do you feel that stuff that you've learned from these memories or any lessons that you've learned impacts how you approach your own life today?

**Sonia Chon**

Well, yes. There's a place for both, and I think it's really important. I've grown to believe that it's so important to have a good balance. My father died in his early fifties. His dream was always to retire and get an RV and travel and camp and fish and just enjoy life. He never reached that. Because of that, I feel like it's really influenced me to enjoy my life, through, daily. Can you ask the question one more time?

**Nano Chon**

Yes. All these memories that you've talked about, how do you feel they've influenced you and your thought process on how to approach life?

**Sonia Chon**

So, I think that's something I hope that I've passed on to you as well, is, we've asked you, "What is it you would like to do?" We've asked you, "What is it that you would like to study," when you chose swimming of all things to do, we were like, "Nobody swims in our family." Yet, we wanted that for you because that's what brought you joy. And so, I just hope that you live that joyful life that we hope for you because what I do is, I love pottery. When you left to go to college ... I wanted to ... I didn't want to dwell in the sadness and loss of you being gone. Therefore, I focused my energy on something new. My father was extremely artistic, and I hope that I got a little bit of that ability from him. And so, I started the pottery again, and I do it every day if I can. Whether it's making sketches of new patterns that I want to try or – I'm there – I met some lady on the airplane on our flight up this time, and she also happened to be a potter. So, we talked about pottery for three hours on the plane and shared little bits and bits of

advice for each other about problems that we might be having. She was amazed that I go to the studio five days a week. I go Monday through Friday, nine to five. I take my little lunch. It brings me such joy, and the community of people that I have now found. It's this new group of friends, but it's all about the joy of each day, those people – I have friends there who are 80 years old, who discovered the same love, the same joy of doing pottery after they retire. It's amazing. They're amazing, talented people. So, anyway, sorry that was very long winded.

**Nano Chon**

That's awesome. So, would you say the connection to those memories are that – from your mother, you understand the importance of hard work, dedication?

**Sonia Chon**

Yes.

**Nano Chon**

Making sure everything's done correctly? And from your father, you think you took those elements of still taking the time to enjoy the life that we are given and find what you follow your passions and what you want?

**Sonia Chon**

Yes, because my mother found her – after my father passed, I think my mother had a greater understanding of what he was all about, and she actually learned how to golf. She took swim lessons, tennis lessons, and she actually became quite a little athlete herself. It was sad that they didn't have time to share that when they were both alive. But yes. Ask me the question one more time, I'm going off on a tangent. I got to refocus. Sorry.

**Nano Chon**

The last question was – it was a confirmation of would you say the elements – you have incorporated both sides from your parents?

**Sonia Chon**

Yes. My mother was ... from her – I always say I'm actually not a neat, organized person. Those are skills that I learned from her. She was extremely organized. She was extremely driven. She attended and graduated pharmacy school, after she had had my brother and me. After her nursing she – actually wanted to be a physician, and there just wasn't money for her to go to medical school. So, she went to pharmacy school, and of course she graduated the top of her class. So yes, completely focused. She was the glue that held everything together. And there was my father, who was always making her laugh. He could always make her laugh, and he made us laugh. My husband says to me that I have an idealized vision of my father because I lost him so early. I think he was wrong. I think he was every bit as wonderful and joyful as I remember him [emotional].

**Nano Chon**

I see. Thank you very much for sharing that. So, since we've talked about Halmeoni (할머니) and Harabeoji (할아버지) a lot, I was curious if you have anything – any sort of memories or things from your brother, or any other family members in particular?

**Sonia Chon**

Like my brother's memories of them or my memories?

**Nano Chon**

Memories of your brother, or your memories.

**Sonia Chon**

Oh, my brother's the best. My brother and I – I remember our teachers always saying – being very surprised that he was my brother. Because they would always say that typical, "Oh, you guys are like night and day." My brother also has that joy for enjoying life. He has made choices in his life, where he had time to do fun things. He golfs every Wednesday with his primary care physician, who happens to be his friend. He makes time to do those kinds of things. My brother, I remember, even though he was younger, he was the one who taught me how to use a washing machine and wash my clothes because I didn't know how. He was the one who learned how to drive a car first and helped me learn how to drive the stick shift in my car. It was a rabbit. And yes ... I think he might have gotten his driver's license first. He went out and got a job, stocking dog food on weekends, so that he would have extra spending money. He would install everyone – all of his friends' security systems, new radios, new speakers in their cars, whatever, because there was nothing my brother couldn't take apart and put back together again. He was the child that always got in trouble because when he would get Christmas presents, five minutes later, all the cars had different tires and different accessories on his Hot Wheels all changed and whatnot. It drove my parents crazy because he would take the radio apart, put it back together. He would take the phone apart, put it back together because he wanted to know how things worked. And I was the rule follower, who would never ever do anything like that. And yes, we're night and day, yet we're so, so close. He still lives with me as he's a bachelor. And he still lives with me. So how lucky am I?

**Nano Chon**

I see. So, I asked you a similar question. And of course, it's just kind of come from your own interpretation. Do you think immigrating to America was beneficial for Uncle Frankie?

**Sonia Chon**

Absolutely. I think so I really think – I don't know if this is Americanism that's coming through. But even when I've traveled abroad, whether it was Asia or Europe, or the – what is it, the Caribbean or even Central America. Each time I came back here [United States], I have obviously, I felt a sense of home. But things are great here. We're so privileged here in the States. We have so much, and as far as opportunity, I feel like someone like my brother who's a creative – he's a product designer, and he went to art school. He didn't do your traditional STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) type thing. He's been able to make a living and live well here in the States because creativity, artistic skill, things like that, I think are – or at least I'm prejudiced in thinking that they are embraced here and

celebrated here in the States. Whereas in Korea, I feel like he would have been maybe seen as lesser because he would not, maybe have been financially as successful there, as he has been able to be here. Yes.

### **Nano Chon**

So, before we dive into the topic of identity, I wanted to – if you're okay with this to go into a little bit about your parents' backgrounds, and some of their history. So, would it be possible for you to give a general background for Harabeoji and Halmeoni in terms of where they're from?

### **Sonia Chon**

Okay. My mother, I don't know that much about her history. One of the other things is my mother had – both my parents had really tragic childhoods because of the Korean War, and they were both what you would consider war orphans. So, my mother I know was born in an area that is currently in South Korea called Chuncheon (춘천). I think it's south of Seoul. She was one of, I think, five children. I know three for sure, but there must have been an older, at least one older sibling, so maybe four. Everything's been told to me by either that adoptive grandma – her adoptive mother, who was not your real traditional adoptive mother, and I can explain that later. And my father, my father has always been the person who has – we had great conversations, he told me so much about himself and my mother, but my mother did not talk about her past because she was all about, “I'm in the here and now, and this is where I'm going, and I need to focus on going forward”. So, she lost her parents during the Korean War; they were actually executed. She was told to go outside to take her baby sister and younger brother and go play outside away from the house. And they were – her parents, and I think one or two siblings were executed. Her father owned, I think like a leather tanning factory or something like that. After that happened, she was – they were, the three younger ones, the two younger siblings and my mother were placed in an orphanage. She was able to find her brother later in life, and I have photos with him, but I don't really remember him. She was never able to find the baby sister. But she didn't have a good relationship with that brother because he resented her for not keeping him with her. But my mother was, I think, twelve when this happened, so it wouldn't have been possible. But it's something I know that she tried to make up for. I remember her trying to have a relationship I think with him, but that's a little vague. That might have been just things my father told me. And then she was later adopted by this woman, who is her adoptive mother, who she worked or ran the orphanage that my mother was sent to. She was adopted, but not really. My mother was left with I think quite a bit of money because of the family that she came from, but that also disappeared. If you ask me now, do I have good memories of this adoptive grandmother who sponsored us here? I don't really. Because I never felt like she was my grandmother. That's not very nice of me, but that's – I'm being honest. Now my father's history. Yes. Okay. All right. So, I actually contacted my cousin, whose father was a cousin of my father, and he gave me basic information of about their family history. So, I'm just going to – do you want me to just give you that information?

### **Nano Chon**

Yes, please.

### **Sonia Chon**

Okay. So, my father was descended from somebody named Kim Gwangsan (김씨광산). It's a clan, I guess. And ... it's the Gwangsan Kim (광산 김씨) clan. And he was from a northern area, which of course, at the time he was born was not considered North Korea. That all happened later. But he was born in some place called Kangso-guyok (강서구역) in Korea, which is part of the South Pyongan Province (평안남도). He was born in the lunar year of 1932, and for I guess, legal purposes, he just established that is birthday was December 2, but when he was alive...

**Nano Chon**

Please continue.

**Sonia Chon**

I remember him always telling me when his actual birthday was because he would follow the lunar calendar, and it was usually in December sometime. He was the eldest son, but the second oldest child, so he had two sisters and three brothers. He was a child of farmers. From what my uncle said ... they farmed apples, they had animals, so they were farmers. Yes. This was something really surprising was that my father's grandfather was actually the one who converted to Adventism when Adventism was brand new with ... almost the first missionaries way back when. So, I was really shocked by that. And that grandfather had seven boys. Yes. So anyway, your great, great grandfather's name was Kim Bong Oo (김봉우), and he is the one who converted to Adventism. And he had seven boys. Your great grandfather was named Kim Jung Uk (김정욱), and he was the third son, and he was a farmer. And then your grandfather, my father's name was Kim Gun Mok (김건목), and he was born in what is now considered North Korea. Do you want me to tell you about his escape?

**Nano Chon**

Yes, please. I just had one question.

**Sonia Chon**

Yes, sure.

**Nano Chon**

Do you mind expanding upon what Adventism is? It's a sect of Christianity, however, what denomination – Could you go over key points of what the main differences may be?

**Sonia Chon**

Okay. Well, we are a Protestant religion, very much like the Methodists. We believe in the Sabbath or the Saturday being the seventh day, so we worship from Friday night sundown to Saturday night sundown. So, we keep the Sabbath. We believe in both the Old and the New Testament completely. We are known for our health message by the founding, the religions, one of the religions founders Ellen G. White, and that's why there are so many Adventist Health care workers, physicians, nurses, doctors, and – yes. Anything else about them?

**Nano Chon**

So, would you say Adventism is a major religion for Koreans that you – the way you understand?

**Sonia Chon**

In my community? Yes. But I actually have found that there is a huge population of Korean Catholics, which I did not know because that wasn't part of my world. But yes, Adventism is – especially with the people that immigrated over in the time period that we immigrated. There's a lot of Adventists because we were healthcare workers, and the US needed an influx of health care workers at that time. That's why immigration I think was open. That was I was always led to believe that that's one of the reasons why we were able to come over to the States was because my mother and father were both air healthcare workers. Yes. Yes.

**Nano Chon**

Very interesting. And I'm sorry, you were going to expand upon Harabeoji's story of escape?

**Sonia Chon**

Yes. So even though he was born in the northern area there, south of – it's actually southeast of what is Pyongyang (평양시), which is the capital of North Korea. Being the oldest male, when he was, I think around sixteen. The 38th parallel – there were rumors, I guess, of the 38th parallel closing. And so, he was sent as the oldest male with this other cousin who I got a lot this information from, and a few others, and they just escaped there. I remember him telling me that they ate grasshoppers and snakes at night, they would wade through streams and rivers. They would – and it was a very harrowing story – that he shared with me. I also remember because of his hearing loss from the accident when he was younger, others in the group did not want to bring him initially. This particular uncle that I'm very close to him – I found out this very recently that he was the one who said, "No, he's going with us. We're taking him." even though he was younger than the rest of them. And yes. I remember him telling me about the escape, and how difficult it was, and then, pretty much being someone who's like, sixteen, seventeen years old, being an orphan, and raising himself in Korea.

**Nano Chon**

I see. If you don't mind expanding upon – how did he lose this hearing?

**Sonia Chon**

Well, it's that typical bully story ... I don't ever remember him telling me how old he was, or I might have forgotten, but he and his – the boys in his neighborhood or area were playing and they were – they played rough and they held his head underwater. He lived in the country, his ears got infected and basically be infection set in in the middle ear and the bones pretty much got infected and rotted. So, my father, I always remember him wearing a hearing aid on one ear. Because he said when he wore two, it made it more difficult, and so the quality of hearing was better with just the one even though two would have helped. I remember him being very disappointed later in life because he wasn't a good candidate for the cochlear implants and things like that. But anyway, yes.

**Nano Chon**

Thank you for that background that about Halmeoni and Harabeoji. I was curious about something, so it sounds like Halmeoni and Harabeoji had very traumatic – and all things considered, lives, becoming orphans, and all that sort of stuff. I was curious – especially for Harabeoji, sounds like he, at least later

in life, when you knew him and such that he was a very positive man, that he was very fun loving. I was wondering, do you see in your own eyes, his positive attitude as a response to or related to at least trauma he experienced during life?

### **Sonia Chon**

Yes, my father was not your typical Korean dad, or Korean male because I had other Korean friends growing up and my father was different than them. My father, maybe because he had such loss and maybe because he could choose to grow up and what is established his own belief system because he didn't have parents to guide him during those pivotal later, teen years. He always told me, "Sonia, do not ever let being a female stop you from doing and being anything you want to be." My friends did not. My Korean friends did not have fathers who treated them that way. They were always slightly less than their brothers. I remember a friend ... I remember several friends in high school – I had some really close friends, Korean friends in high school, and some of them were Adventists and some of them were not. Yet, their experiences were so different than mine. So, just like he had that very different way of thinking – actually quite modern. He married somebody who he knew was much more focused than he was and that she was almost – what is it? Dominant, I guess, than he was and he was completely okay with that, because it didn't – her belief in herself did not diminish him, and so that was different. And then also, for somebody who – he had a wonderful childhood, when he was a child before he had to leave his home. He shared great memories of – my father ate an apple every day of his life. I mean every day, he loved the – I did not like this particular kind of apple. It's called a Red Delicious. And he ate one every day after dinner, if not more during the day. He grew up on a farm that had lots of apples, apple trees, and he would tell me stories about him picking apples and eating them and things like this. He told me stories about how he would go, what is it? Ice skating. He loved speed skating, on the pond. Things like that. I don't think he let – because he never sounded sad when he told me stories about his life, even the tough things. He embraced it, maybe – and that's why I feel solace sometimes. Because even though his life was shorter, he enjoyed it so much. Because he had fun. He always had lots of friends, both my parents did. On Sabbath afternoons, after we would go to the park and we played and whatnot, then they would come over to our house. We didn't go to other people's homes, they would come to our homes, and they would – my mother and her friends would cook meals, and my father would be having fun and there would always be laughter. He kept up these hobbies. He kept up his – the fact like he played tennis with the same group of friends. As long as remember, twice a week. It was I think, Thursday nights and Saturday nights. They would after work. Now, I forgot the question.

### **Nano Chon**

It was about the tennis and the friends.

### **Sonia Chon**

Oh, okay. So yes, they would play tennis. He would go fishing with the same group of friends. He would take my brother fishing. My brother did not enjoy getting up at three in the morning to catch the big boat to go out and do deep sea fishing. He just enjoyed life. I remember him telling me about when he wrenched his knee snow skiing because in the olden days, they had leather straps that you had to literally buckle onto your ankles, things like this. Yes, he taught me. Anyway, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

### **Nano Chon**

Oh, I see very interesting. Listening to all that, especially the part of the beginning, I'm just curious. Would you say that at least Harabeoji in particular and also sounds like Halmeoni, not rejected, but they did not abide by norms? So traditional norms ... traditions and stuff that probably had been going on for decades.

**Sonia Chon**

Yes. So that's why I don't really know what it's like to be Korean Korean because my parents were very different than their friends. My mother was much more – she was always – if you had a question, it was always call – my mother's nursery school friends, they – most of them had sons. My mother was referred to as "Frank's mom, always call Frank's mom. If you have a question about how to do this, or do that type of thing." And so, yes, she didn't really have a traditional sense of who she was either because she lost her parents so early. I think both my parents, they were interesting and unique. And that's why I'm sharing this because you'll get different stories from each family, but I think ours is unique.

**Nano Chon**

So, this is kind of a transition, the concept of identity. So, we're going to start specifically with you, how has that concept appeared throughout your life? These elements consist of ethnicity, nationality, religion, all sorts of those things. How would you self-identify who you are then? Let's start with how you were as a child, how would you identify yourself as a child?

**Sonia Chon**

I don't understand like, what do you mean by identity?

**Nano Chon**

I would say if you had to use a word to describe you, or a few words of description, when it came to ethnicity, nationality, religion, what would those words be?

**Sonia Chon**

Do you mean Korean-American?

**Nano Chon**

How strongly would you feel that is what you felt you who you were?

**Sonia Chon**

I felt American.

**Nano Chon**

Even as a child?

**Sonia Chon**

Even as a child, because my best friend, April Porter, was blond hair, blue eyes, and she was my best friend. She kind of became my – I don't want to say protector. But she did it in a way because when I came to the States, I didn't know the language yet – she is my oldest friend that I can remember. She

was popular and she was just as cute as a button. She became my friend, therefore, I was April Porter's friend, and so you couldn't mess with me. Maybe that's why I was not bullied, because I had April, and I don't know. You know how I gave you a hard time about doing sleepovers and stuff and you were a male? Well, back then as a female Korean child, you were not allowed to do that type of thing. But April – my parents eventually let me sleep over at April's house, and April's parents would take us for the summer to go like waterskiing and take these one-week water ski trips, that kind of thing. So, April – and I think it's because April was your all American girl, I identified with that. I didn't see myself as different than her necessarily. Yes. Yes.

**Nano Chon**

So that identity that you seem to describe as being American, would you say that it's changed as time has gone on? Are there more aspects of your identity that you identify with more?

**Sonia Chon**

Well, when I went to college – I think this is normal. Within the Korean Adventist community, many of them go to our Adventist colleges. So, when I went to La Sierra, all these Korean American kids that I grew up with, or of my age were there at the same time, and I was curious about them. I was curious about being Korean because I knew my parents acted differently than other Korean people, their friends. So, I tried to kind of hang out with them and do things with them and engage them in my social circle. Didn't work really well because the girls were fine, but I felt like the boys were domineering. And then the girls would acquiesce and be almost like second-class citizens with them. And you know that that doesn't work with me. So that social – the intermingling that I did with that I kind of abandoned that pretty quickly. I would say, maybe through first semester of college, and then I just established other friends. And they were not this more what I consider Koreanized, Koreans. Because there were Korean kids that were first generation like me, right, because I'm a first generation. But I came over at six, whereas they might have come over maybe at eleven, twelve, and they were definitely more Korean than I was. And so yes, our value systems seemed different. Yes. Yes, we're just different.

**Nano Chon**

And as you stand today, would you – how would you – the same question I've asked the past few times. So, as you stand today, how would you identify yourself self-identify?

**Sonia Chon**

I'm an American.

**Nano Chon**

You're an American.

**Sonia Chon**

I'm an American. I don't know enough about my Korean side. You know how much I love history. And so, I'm thrilled that you're taking this course. Because I think I've seen your own curiosity, blossom, bloom, whatever. I think it's good. I think it's good to – because that's really, I mean, we are whether we realize it or not Korean Korean. I just don't know what it's like to be Korean. I know what my parents were like, but they were my parents. Even when I even look at the modern Korea now, I have to say, I

don't think I would do well there. But they're – what they see is important. Their value system is different than mine. What they think is good, in vogue whatever, it's just different. And I feel bad about the times anyway because I'm just older. But yes, I would say I'm an American, like when I see the American flag. Like today, I was coming on campus, saw that was at half mast, makes me cry [emotional]. When I think of our soldiers overseas, it makes me cry. I say our soldiers because I feel American.

### **Nano Chon**

Beautiful. On that topic of self-identification, how do you think your development from pre and post immigration makes your self-identification differ from how your parents saw themselves? Basically, how do you think immigration impacted that difference between you and your parents in terms of identity? Or how? I'm sorry, I'm going to back up a second. How do you think, in your opinion that your parents identified themselves? Halmeoni and Harabeoji.

### **Sonia Chon**

As Koreans who immigrated to the United States. They lived within a community of their own Korean friends. My mother – my father definitely had much – the majority of his friends were Korean. My mother had mostly Korean friends, but she also had quite a few friends of all different nationalities from her work. So, they were Caucasian. There were Filipino – different ethnicities of friends. After my father passed, my mother had – yes she had her Korean friends, and maybe it's because she didn't have her life partner anymore. She really, I felt like she grew personally. Most of her friends were Americans. They were, I mean of different ethnicities, but they were not of her Korean group. She still maintained contact with them, and she still attended church weekly with them. But her social circle and the things that she chose to do, were not with them. So, it's very interesting. So, I saw her identity as you call it, change. I see. I don't know if I answered your question. Sorry.

### **Nano Chon**

You did. You did. And so obviously, your – both your parents' identities, are these your opinion of them? They differed? Am I'm sure that comes with...?

### **Sonia Chon**

It might have been the language because my mother was so much more proficient at the English language than my father was. My father, I remember when he spoke to me in English. It was very – like a little professor kind, very proper, but not conversational. I always I remember saying to him, "You can just speak to me in Korean dad," because I understood what he was saying to me in Korean. But then also, my mother only spoke English and Korean. I mean, only yes, knew English and Korean. Whereas my father, he knew more languages than she did. He knew his Korean; he knew his Japanese. Because he was five years older than her. So, he would have been in the grade school system at the time of the Japanese occupation. And then he also – when he was in college took German, so he was proficient at German. And then he knew whatever he did of English, which was, which was fine. It just wasn't as accomplished as my mother. That's all. Yes.

### **Nano Chon**

I see. And then now, as we come to a close, I was curious about a very, very broad question. Yes. I'm going to use this term in quotes, I will say. Through all of what you've experienced through your life,

and what you know of the experience of your parents? How would the term "play" come into the equation you could say? Is play escape? Is play simply enjoyment? What is it in that whole broad context? I'm sorry, it's a very broad question. And we can break it – you can break it down, however you would like.

### **Sonia Chon**

Okay. My sense of play, if we talk about like my father would be – my father literally got out there with us and played with us. Therefore, he is the person who taught me how to dribble a soccer ball with my feet, dribble the basketball with my hands. I remember him setting up something called a pitch back. It was a metal frame. It was, yes, it was like a metal frame that had a net and had a rectangle in the center, and you were supposed to stand back at a certain distance and be able to throw a baseball, hit that center spot, have the ball bounce back, and catch it in your mitt. I spent so much time out there in the side yard because we had this long side yard, and quote, playing and getting better at that kind of thing. He taught me how to roller skate. He taught me how to fish. He taught me how to – they had – my parents have always had tons and tons of the first home roses. And then it was orchids. Oh my goodness. My mother had so many orchids, and my dad – she [Halmeoni] loved growing orchids – and he, what is it? He constructed this expansive, like a greenhouse kind of thing for that. They had vegetable gardens that we ate, our meals. We would, what is it? We would pick the peppers that we were going to eat that night, the lettuce whatever, for the salad or whatnot. They always had gardens and I, obviously came from a farming family. It makes sense now, right? But that's enjoyment that's not play. But to him that's all part of that. So, there was the actual play, play and simple enjoyment. My father and I – he and I shared, shared a love of literature. My love of literature comes from him. I remember him reading me, O. Henry. O. Henry is still one of my favorite authors [emotional] because my father read all the time. He never went anywhere without a book. Always he would read things in German, he would read things ... in Japanese authors in Japanese, German authors in German. He would read Korean, obviously Korean authors and always had a book with him. Always. So, when you say play, I hear the word enjoyment of life. That's how I am interpreting its usage in this question that you're asking me, and I think I have so many of those things. But then we can't leave my mother out because my mother used to sew my entire wardrobe every summer, about a month before school would start, she and I would go to cloth world that was the fabric store. She would have me peruse the catalogs for the patterns; we would choose them. Then we walk around the store, and we would coordinate fabrics, and then she would just make them. I always would be the child that got the "Best Dressed Award" at school, when you had things like it was most that "Most Athletic", "Most Popular", whatever things. I was always the best dressed. I always got that award. And so, my mother's enjoyment, or sense of play was in making and doing for us. We always had homemade meals; I remember ... you know how picky an eater I am. I remember my mother, even though she worked a lot, she would always make us homemade meals. If she wasn't going to be there, like when she worked on Sabbath, my dad would take us to church, and then he would go and sometimes we'd go up and see her at the hospital. We'd go to the cafeteria, and we'd have something called, "Vegetarian Swiss Steak" which is horrifying. But at the time, my brother and I thought it was wonderful. Or if we got really lucky, he would take us to McDonald's on the way home, and I would get a Fish Fillet Sandwich with a vanilla shake and French fries. Frank and I so loved those times when mom would work on a Saturday because then dad would take us there. So, to answer your question, I think – what was the question again?

**Nano Chon**

How would you define play in your life?

**Sonia Chon**

Play is the enjoyment of life. I always tell you, "Today is a blessing today is a gift and you have the gift of today enjoy it as the blessing that it is" [emotional]. And so, whether it's doing my ceramics or having a conversation with you when you call or making some meal, some new salad that your dad is obsessed about or whatnot, it's all about enjoyment. It's the blessing. So, I guess if you say play, I think in terms of what how I was taught by both my parents. Yes, it's play in the traditional sense. But more as in enjoying each moment in life. And be thankful for those because the enjoyment is blessings. And so, the joy or the blessings, I guess.

**Nano Chon**

Beautiful description, value and enjoyment of life.

**Sonia Chon**

Yes. Yes, that's what it is.

**Nano Chon**

Thank you so much for that. And is there – are there any other things that you would like to share just in general?

**Sonia Chon**

In what sense?

**Nano Chon**

Maybe there's an anecdote that you want to talk about, or maybe there was some basically core memory or lesson that you've learned? Maybe just some experience ... if there's anything that you want to say that I could in my questions could not cover that you feel is important to you.

**Sonia Chon**

I just think there's so much. Is there anything in a direction? Can you give me a direction?

**Nano Chon**

Yes, if we want to build off that topic of play, can you name one core memory that encapsulates that term, in terms of maybe something you share with Harabeoji, your friends, or something? I know that's very difficult because of the entire life that you've lived. But just if there's anything that you feel is very pertinent to share? Or maybe something you think is important to share about yourself, doesn't even have to be a memory. Something you would just like to have known.

**Sonia Chon**

Having this conversation with you. Lots of things, I mean ... I'm inundated with thoughts, and actually, going through this interview, I'm thinking, so much of what my father shared with me, his sense of play

his enjoyment of life really, is something that I think I've passed on to you in a way, right? I mean, sometimes unwillingly. I've tortured you with tons of history. I, what is it? He was very philosophical. I share philosophical thoughts with you all the time. We always encourage you to enjoy life, I think that's something that we always do. And so truly, in a sense, I am so much of the person that my father raised me to be, and I feel like I've passed that on to you, whether it's love of literature, whether – because I love the fact that you were telling me that you were reading the book about, the age of – I can't remember the exact title of the H-Mart book, right? Yes, I think it's great, because you had to read it, even though I don't think I would have asked you to read that particular book. I think I've shared – it's because one of the things that really, really, really, really is sad for me, is that you didn't get to know my father or mother. And yet, I guess through me having this conversation, I've passed on things that they have passed on to me to you, and I continue to do so. So, thank you for this opportunity. This was really lovely that I could come up and do this in person. It's wonderful. Thank you and thank your professor.

**Nano Chon**

Thank you, Mom, thank you so much for your time. Even though it's tough the things you're able to share about Harabeoji, yourself, Halmeoni, everything. Thank you for taking the time to come up. As you've said. Just thank you so much for this interview.

**Sonia Chon**

Thank you for being you.